

• Very broadly it can be said that current friction materials, whether they be disc brake pads, passenger car and commercial vehicle brake linings or clutch facings, contain 50 per cent chrysotile asbestos. The new trends of development, particularly in the fields of disc brake pads and commercial vehicle brake linings, indicate that the percentage of asbestos included in the mix is likely to decline. Some new materials now contain approximately 40 per cent asbestos, and newer mixes can be foreseen with an even lower percentage, probably down to a minimum of 30 per cent. The pads for disc brakes require less asbestos fibre than conventional drum brake linings. It is estimated that more and more passenger cars produced in the U.K. will in future be equipped with disc brakes, particularly on the front wheels.

THE BIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF ASBESTOS

The variation existing in the biological effects of the different types of asbestos is the subject of considerable interest and research, and the extent to which the physical and chemical characteristics of the asbestos itself influence biological effects is being investigated. The role of trace elements and contaminants associated with the fibres has also to be considered.

The chief biological effects of asbestos are confined to the lung and the pleura, or lining of the lung and chest cavity, and to the peritoneum, or lining of the abdominal cavity. A few cases of skin corns have occurred in asbestos workers, but these are becoming much less common.

All types of asbestos, if inhaled in fairly high concentrations over a considerable period of time, may cause fibrosis of the lungs. This disease, called asbestosis, consists of thickening of the lung membranes with resultant stiffening of the tissues and interference with oxygen uptake. The interference with gas transfer is the reason for the shortness of breath which causes the disability associated with asbestosis.

• The amount of exposure required to produce fibrosis of the pleura, with or without calcium deposition in the scars, is more debatable. It may be that shorter, less concentrated exposures, particularly in youth, leave this mark upon the pleura. In any event this particular effect of asbestos inhalation causes little or no disability in itself.

Exposure to asbestos may lead to further complications, e.g., heart failure, cancer of the lung, or, rarely, to malignant changes in the pleura or peritoneum, known as mesothelioma. Cancer of the lung has been shown to be more common in asbestos workers who smoke, just as it is in the general population. Mesotheliomas are very uncommon throughout the world, but in some areas they have been associated more frequently with exposure to crocidolite than to chrysotile, amosite or anthophyllite. The reasons for this are at present obscure, but are being sought intensively by investigators in many different countries.

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