

ASBESTOS RELATED DISEASES

Asbestosis, or scarring of the lungs and/or the pleura which lines the lungs, is a serious long-term illness that was first recognized in workers exposed to high dust levels for long periods of time. The body reacts to the inhaled fibers by producing scar tissue. As this microscopic scarring builds up, the lungs become stiff and restricted with thickening in the walls of the breathing spaces. The stiffening of the lungs, when severe, can make it difficult to breathe, causing shortness of breath. The thickening in the wall of the air sacs makes it more difficult for oxygen to pass into the blood stream and fluid can accumulate in the lungs.

Since asbestos resides in the lungs for a long time, these events are progressive. Over thirty years may elapse from the time of first exposure before scarring has progressed sufficiently to be detected. When significant scarring has taken place, these changes can usually, but not always, be seen on a chest x-ray. There are likewise, progressive changes in the breathing tests which measure lung function.

Asbestosis is not a cancer. However, it has been found that asbestos can cause a variety of cancers.

Lung Cancer is the most common type of asbestos-related cancer. It is surprising to realize that lung cancer was rare in our society fifty years ago. Autopsies of asbestos workers made in 1935 were our first indication of the relationship between asbestos and cancer. Among asbestos insulation workers, approximately twenty percent of deaths are from lung cancer at the present time. Occupational exposure to asbestos in this group of workers increases the risk of lung cancer five times compared to the risk without asbestos exposure. By comparison, cigarette smoking increases the risk for lung cancer about ten times.

Because of interactions in the body, asbestos workers who smoke cigarettes are at 50 to 90 times greater risk for lung cancer than expected. The risk of lung cancer decreases dramatically among those who stop smoking.

Mesothelioma is next in importance among asbestos-caused cancers. Mesothelioma is a tumor occurring in the lining of the lungs or abdomen. It is very rare in our society except in persons with asbestos exposure. It has been seen after low exposures and even very brief exposures of a few days or weeks. It is not related to smoking. It does not often develop before fifteen years after first exposure. Ten percent of deaths among asbestos insulators have been caused by mesothelioma whereas almost none would be expected without asbestos.

Gastrointestinal cancers, especially those of the colon and rectum, are linked to asbestos exposure. They result from the ingestion of asbestos fibers and many of these types of cancers can be cured if early detection is achieved. However, it is often difficult to definitely correlate these types of cancer with exposure to asbestos.

Ovarian and Uterine cancers have also been linked to asbestos exposure.

It is important to know that many years may pass — a long latency period — before any detectable changes from asbestos may be observed. The latency period is usually ten years or more after the first exposure. Workers with days or weeks of extreme exposure have developed symptoms as severe as those exposed to lower levels over many years, but only after a sufficient latency period has elapsed. Some of the nation's leading experts in asbestosis and other environmentally induced sicknesses have estimated

