

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
ABOUT EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS

1. Who may be at risk of developing asbestos-related diseases?

Workers in many occupations, particularly in asbestos mining and processing, shipyards, construction, and workers in automotive brake lining repair commonly are exposed to asbestos, and may inhale or perhaps swallow dusts contaminated with concentrations of this substance.

Risks of disease due to asbestos exposures have not been defined clearly for all occupational groups known to have significant exposure. Firm scientific data are available only for heavily exposed workers employed in asbestos mining, manufacture and insulation. Over the past several years, evidence has accumulated that asbestos insulation workers previously employed in shipyards and elsewhere are experiencing asbestosis, a progressive and disabling lung disease, and markedly increased rates of cancer. Workers who manufactured the asbestos insulation materials used in shipyards also have increased asbestos-related disease.

There is evidence that the problem may be more widespread than previously believed. Workers from a variety of trades who have been employed in shipyards, presumably in or near areas contaminated by asbestos dust, are now beginning to show signs of X-ray abnormalities in the lungs typical of asbestos exposure. These include painters, electricians, carpenters, machinists, boilermakers, and welders who may not realize they were exposed.

Large numbers of persons worked around asbestos in shipyards during and since World War II. During the peak war years, 1940-44, an estimated 4.5 million persons worked in shipyards in the United States, and even those not directly exposed to asbestos dust may have a higher risk of asbestos-related disease. In the last 15 years, the number of shipyard workers has stabilized to an annual workforce of approximately 200,000. Because of the high turnover in jobs during the war and afterward, no one really knows how many many people experienced significant asbestos exposure in their work in the shipyards.

The total number of workers exposed to asbestos since the beginning of World War II, including shipyard workers is estimated between 8 and 11 million.

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