

Asbestos-related Diseases

People exposed to asbestos can develop diseases in later life. These most commonly affect the lungs but can also affect the lining of the tummy (abdomen). Some conditions - for example, mesothelioma or lung cancer - are more serious than others. This leaflet gives a brief overview of the diseases that are related to having an exposure to asbestos in the past.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a material that was used in the past in buildings. It is an insulating material that is both heat-resistant and fire-resistant. There are different types of asbestos: white, brown and blue.

It used to be thought that blue and brown asbestos were more harmful than white asbestos but it is now known that all three forms are linked to cancers. Although they are all harmful, blue and brown asbestos are the most strongly linked with cancers and they have not been imported into the UK since 1985. However, they are still present in some buildings and equipment produced before the ban. White asbestos has been banned in the UK since 1999.

Asbestos materials which are left undisturbed are probably safe. It is asbestos dust or fibres which cause the harm when they are breathed in (inhaled) or swallowed (ingested).

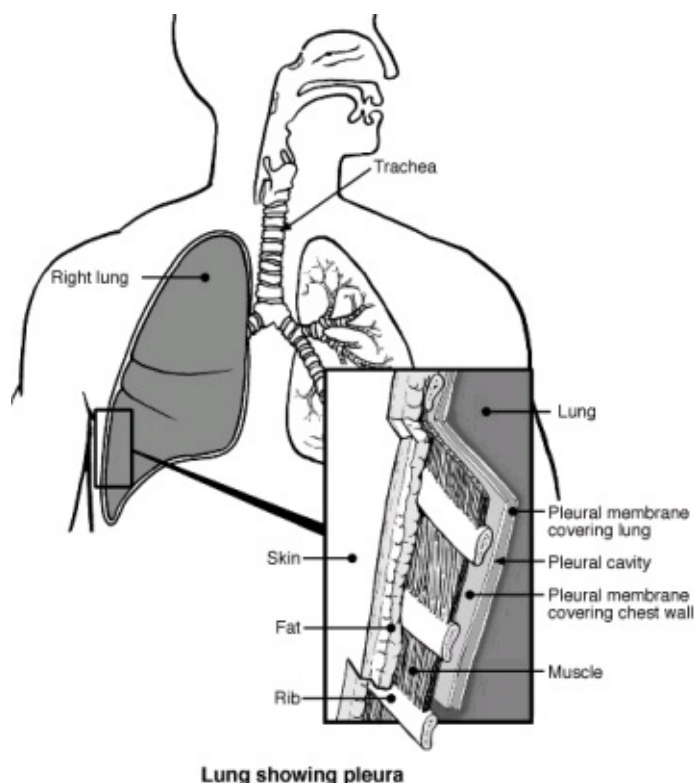
Having a previous exposure to asbestos is associated with various different diseases. These mainly affect the lungs and include the following.

Pleural plaques

The pleura is a thin membrane with two layers. One layer lines the inside of the chest wall. The other layer covers the lungs.

Between the two layers of pleura (the pleural cavity) is a tiny amount of fluid. This acts like lubricating oil between the lungs and the chest wall as they move when you breathe.

Pleural plaques are small, raised areas or tissue which usually occur on the pleura. These are sometimes found when you have a chest X-ray for another condition. Pleural plaques are not usually associated with any symptoms but can occasionally cause chest pain. They are an indication that you have been exposed to asbestos at some time in your life. There is some evidence that people with pleural plaques are more likely to develop mesothelioma. (see 'Mesothelioma', below) They are not, however, a risk factor for asbestosis (see 'Asbestosis', below).



Diffuse pleural thickening

Diffuse pleural thickening is a thickening of the pleura of either one or both lungs. It is sometimes associated with a build-up of fluid in between the two layers of pleura. It most commonly leads to worsening shortness of breath and also tightness in the chest, as the lungs cannot fully expand when you breathe in.

A chest X-ray may show the diffuse pleural thickening. A **CT scan** and **breathing tests (spirometry)** may also be performed.

There is currently no treatment for diffuse pleural thickening. However, the outlook (prognosis) is often good as, for many people, the condition does not worsen with time.

Asbestos pleurisy or effusion

Asbestos pleurisy is inflammation of the pleura next to the lungs. This is often associated with a build-up of fluid around the lung (an effusion). This often leads to pain when you breathe in and also worsening shortness of breath.

A chest **X-ray** may show this condition. However, a sample of the fluid around the lungs is often taken to confirm the diagnosis. A small sample (**biopsy**) of the pleura may need to be taken to look at under the microscope to confirm the diagnosis.

The fluid is usually drained. It can sometimes come back (recur) in the future.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a condition that causes scarring of the lungs. Asbestosis usually develops at least twenty years after being exposed to a large amount of asbestos. The most common symptoms are shortness of breath which progressively worsens with time. In addition, a cough may be present, which is usually a dry cough.

Asbestosis is usually diagnosed from the appearance of a chest X-ray and/or a CT scan of the chest. Breathing tests (spirometry) may also be done. Occasionally, a small sample (biopsy) of the lung may be needed to confirm the diagnosis.

Although asbestosis is incurable, there are different treatments available to help improve the symptoms it causes. **Inhalers** are often given to help with shortness of breath. It may sometimes be treated with **steroid tablets** and other medication.

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that occurs in the tissues which cover the lungs or tummy (abdomen). The lining around the lungs is the pleura and in the abdomen it is called the peritoneum.

See separate leaflet called **Mesothelioma** for more details.

Lung cancer

Asbestos exposure is a risk for all types of lung cancer. This risk is increased further if you also smoke.

See separate leaflet called **Lung Cancer** for more details.

Cancer of the throat (larynx)

Most cases of cancer of the larynx occur in people who smoke. However, a previous exposure to asbestos may be a risk factor for cancer of the larynx.

See separate leaflet called **Laryngeal (Throat) Cancer** for more details.

Compensation

People with asbestos-related lung disease may be eligible for compensation through the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) from the Department for Work and Pensions (see link under 'Further reading & references', below) or a civil law claim for damages from the employer at the time of asbestos exposure.

Further help & information

Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum UK

Web: www.asbestosforum.org.uk

Further reading & references

- [Asbestos related disease statistics](#); Health and Safety Executive
- [Asbestos health and safety](#); Health and Safety Executive
- [DB1 – A guide to Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefits \(April 2013\)](#); Dept for Work and Pensions
- [O'Reilly KM, McLaughlin AM, Beckett WS, et al; Asbestos-related lung disease. Am Fam Physician. 2007 Mar 1;75\(5\):683-8.](#)

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