

Asbestos Toxicity

Patient Education Care Instruction Sheet

**What Is
Asbestos**

Asbestos is a mineral found in nature. Until recently, asbestos was mined in the United States. Over time, it has been released into the environment as a result of its many, widespread uses such as in building materials and brake linings.

Beginning in the 1970s, the health effects of asbestos were recognized and its industrial uses began to decline. During the period of its widespread use, people who worked with asbestos often breathed substantial quantities of asbestos fibers into their lungs. Today, asbestos is less often used in industry, but it is still found in many older homes, buildings, and automobile parts.

**How Can People
Be Exposed to
Asbestos**

Asbestos-containing materials, such as insulation or building materials, that are damaged, loose, or disturbed can release asbestos fibers into the air. People who perform home renovations on older homes containing asbestos-containing materials can be exposed. Construction workers involved in demolitions and remodeling work in older buildings can also be exposed.

Also, some areas of the United States have asbestos-bearing rocks that are close to the earth's surface. These rocks can sometimes be disturbed during construction and other activities such as gardening, causing asbestos fibers to be released into the air.

Regardless of the source when released, asbestos fibers can become lodged in your lungs if you breathe them in which can sometimes lead to disease.

**How Can
Asbestos Affect
Health?**

If you have been exposed to enough asbestos, you might or might not get sick. The diseases most commonly associated with asbestos exposure involve the lungs.

In general, your risk of developing asbestos-related lung disease increases with the amount of asbestos you breathe in. Asbestos fibers cannot be effectively washed out or surgically removed from your lungs. If you do get sick, your symptoms will typically appear 10 to 40 years after you were first exposed.

**Asbestos
Associated
Diseases**

Asbestos usually affects the respiratory system, although it can affect other parts of the body as well.

Illness	Description	Symptoms
Asbestosis	A chronic lung disease caused by the scarring or thickening of lung tissue. It occurs in people with high exposures such as those who have worked with asbestos for a living.	Usually: Breathlessness that gets increasingly worse. Sometimes: Cough and chest tightness or pain.

Asbestos-related non-malignant pleural abnormalities	Inflammation or scarring of the lining of the lungs. This scarring does not usually cause people to be ill. These changes in the lung lining can occur with low-level non-work related exposures.	Usually: None. Rare: Difficulty breathing.
Lung cancer	Asbestos exposure can cause the same four types of lung cancer caused by smoking and other factors.	Sometimes: Cough, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.
Mesothelioma	A rare cancer very specific to asbestos exposure. Mesotheliomas can occur on the lining of the lungs or the lining of the abdomen.	Common: Cough, chest pain and difficulty breathing, abdominal swelling and pain.

What Can You Do?

If you have been exposed to asbestos, you should:

- See your physician and follow their advice.
- Quit smoking and avoid second-hand smoke. The combination of smoking and asbestos exposure can increase your risk for asbestos-associated lung cancer greatly. Stopping smoking will protect your health.

When to Call

Call your doctor if you develop any of the following

Your Doctor

symptoms:

- Fever,
- Increased coughing, wheezing, difficulty breathing
- Chest pain, Thickening, foul odor, or color changes in mucus,
- Stuffy nose, sneezing, or sore throat,
- Increased fatigue or weakness,
- Weight gain or loss of more than 6 pounds within a week,
- Swollen ankles or feet.

**Follow-up
Instructions**

Your doctor has checked the items below that require your attention.

Please make an appointment to:

- Have a chest radiograph
 - Undergo pulmonary function tests (simple breathing tests)
 - Discuss appropriate breathing therapies with your physician
 - Begin chest percussion
 - Have pneumococcal and annual influenza shots
 - See another specialist: _____
 - Have other tests: _____
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