

Cancer and asbestos

Asbestos is a mineral made up of tiny fibres. When disturbed, it forms a dust. The fibres can be breathed into the lungs where they remain for decades. Asbestos used to be a common building material, but now we know that long-term exposure to this mineral can cause illnesses like cancer.

Due to these health risks, asbestos is no longer mined, milled or manufactured in Australia. It is illegal to store, sell, install or re-use any products containing asbestos in Australia and no asbestos products may be imported. Asbestos products already in place are allowed. However, strict precautions govern the removal and disposal of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials.

Risky industries

Almost everyone has been exposed to asbestos in small degrees, but some people are at greater risk than others. Long-term exposure to asbestos has occurred in occupations such as:

- Asbestos mining
- Asbestos manufacturing
- Building demolition, if the buildings contain asbestos.

Lung cancer

Cigarette smoking causes most lung cancers, but long-term exposure to asbestos is also a cause of lung cancer. People who smoke and have been exposed to asbestos have a very high risk of developing the disease. Each year in Victoria, about 2,490 people are diagnosed with lung cancer.

There are two main types of lung cancer.

- **Small cell lung carcinoma** – this has a strong relationship to cigarette smoking
- **Non-small cell lung carcinoma** – this has three main forms.

The three forms of non-small cell lung carcinoma are:

- **Squamous cell carcinoma** – this starts in the large air passages, called bronchi.
- **Large cell carcinoma** – similar to squamous cell carcinoma.
- **Adenocarcinoma** – the most common form of lung cancer. Incidence is increasing and may be related to changing patterns of smoking. This starts in glands found in the lining of the airways.

Mesothelioma

This is a rare but fast-spreading cancer that is almost always caused by exposure to asbestos. It can take 30 or 40 years after exposure to develop. Australia has one of the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world. This is due to the high rate of asbestos use and mining over many years.

In Victoria there are about 150 cases diagnosed each year. Experts believe the number of people diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases will not peak until 2020.

Mesothelioma usually starts in the membrane that wraps around the lungs, called the pleura. The cancer cells cause a build-up of fluid between the pleura and the lungs, which in turn causes pressure on the lungs. The symptoms are shortness of breath and a dry, painful cough. The cancer may eventually grow into the chest wall. Sometimes, the cancer can develop in the lining of the abdomen (peritoneum), the membranes of the heart or reproductive organs.

Diagnosing lung cancer or mesothelioma

There are a number of tests to check for lung cancer or mesothelioma, including:

- **X-rays** – either standard x-rays or CT scans, which give a three-dimensional picture of your chest.
- **Sputum cytology test** – an examination of your sputum (phlegm), since cancer cells are sometimes coughed up.
- **Biopsy** – a small sample of lung cells removed with special instruments, under local or general anaesthetic.
- **Other tests** – such as bone, liver or brain scans and blood tests, to see if the cancer cells have spread to other parts of your body.

Treatment of lung cancer and mesothelioma

As lung cancer and mesothelioma are often diagnosed in their later stages, it can be difficult to treat them. However, with more and more research into these types of cancer, treatments are improving. Treatment may include:

- **Surgery** – to remove the tumours.
- **Radiotherapy** – the use of x-rays to kill cancer cells.
- **Chemotherapy** – anti-cancer drugs that kill cancer cells.

Other illnesses linked to asbestos

As well as cancer, some of the other asbestos-linked illnesses include:

- **Asbestosis** – scar tissue forms inside the lungs and makes breathing difficult.
- **Pleural plaque** – asbestos fibres can cause thickened patches of scar tissue on the pleura, or lung lining.

These are non-cancerous conditions.

Legal action

A person who develops lung disease after exposure to asbestos may be entitled to seek compensation. Contact a solicitor for information.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Tel. 1800 646 690
- Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia Tel. (02) 9637 8759
- Cancer Council Helpline Tel. 13 11 20
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria Tel. (03) 9209 0169
- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre Tel. (03) 9656 1111
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089 (toll free) - for general enquiries
- WorkSafe Victoria Emergency Response Line Tel. 13 23 60 - to report **serious workplace emergencies**, seven days, 24 hours
- Environment Protection Authority Victoria Tel. (03) 9695 2722
- Department of Health, Environmental Health Unit Tel. 1300 761 874
- Asbestos Victims Association SA Tel. (08) 8212 6008 or 1800 665 395 (SA country only)

Things to remember

- Asbestos is a mineral that has been linked to many diseases, including lung cancer.
- Mesothelioma is a rare type of fast-growing cancer that is almost always caused by exposure to asbestos.
- Treatment for lung cancer or mesothelioma may include surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Cancer Council Victoria

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