Cancer and asbestos

Summary

- 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, chemotherapy and immunotherapy.

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 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.

High-risk industries and asbestos

Almost everyone has been exposed to asbestos in small degrees, but people working in certain jobs are at greater risk than others, such as:

- people working in asbestos mining
- people working in asbestos manufacturing
- people working in building demolition (if the buildings contain asbestos)
- motor technicians
- electricians
- plumbers
- fitters and turners
- painters and decorators
- engineers
- carpenters
- merchant seamen.

Asbestos and lung cancer

Exposure to asbestos is a cause of lung cancer. People who smoke and have an even higher risk of developing asbestos-related disease.

Australia has one of the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world. This is due to the high rate of asbestos use in products, housing and mining over many years. Fourteen Australians die from mesothelioma every week.

In 2017 the Global Burden of Disease study reported the following deaths in Australia from asbestos-related causes:

- 804 deaths from mesothelioma
- 3,109 deaths from asbestos-related lung cancer
- 145 deaths from asbestos-related ovarian cancer

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• 48 deaths from laryngeal cancer
• 136 deaths from asbestosis.

Asbestos and mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a rare but fast-spreading cancer that is almost always caused by exposure to asbestos. From the time of exposure, it can take anywhere between 15 and 50 years for the symptoms to appear.

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.

Symptoms of pleural mesothelioma may include:
• shortness of breath
• persistent dry, painful cough
• pain in the centre of the chest or pain in the shoulder or upper arm
• continual bouts of pneumonia and pleurisy
• weight loss
• night sweats.

Mesothelioma may eventually grow into the chest wall. Sometimes, it can also develop in the lining of the abdomen (peritoneum), the membranes of the heart (pericardium) or the reproductive organs.

Symptoms of peritoneal mesothelioma may include:
• painful or swollen abdomen
• high temperature
• nausea, vomiting and poor appetite
• bowel and urinary problems.

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), as 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 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 medication that kills cancer cells
• immunotherapy – using parts of your own immune system to recognise and kill cancer cells
• palliative care.

Other illnesses linked to asbestos

As well as cancer, some asbestos-linked non-cancerous conditions include:
• asbestosis – scar tissue forms inside the lungs and makes breathing difficult

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- pleural plaque – asbestos fibres can cause thickened patches of scar tissue on the pleura, or lung lining.

**Compensation claims for cancer linked to asbestos**

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 **GP (doctor)**
  - Asbestos Council of Victoria/GARDS Inc. Tel. (03) 5127 7744 or 0407 274 173 (24 hours, 7 days)
  - Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency Tel. 1300 326 148
  - Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Tel. 1800 646 690
  - Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia Tel. 1800 006 196
  - Cancer Council Information and Support Service Tel. 13 11 20
  - Cancer Council Victoria – Support in your own language Tel. 13 14 50
  - Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre Tel. (03) 8559 5000
  - WorkSafe Victoria Tel. 1800 136 089 (toll free) for general enquiries
  - WorkSafe Victoria Emergency Response Line Tel. 13 23 60 – to report serious workplace emergencies (24 hours, 7 days)
  - Environment Protection Authority Victoria Tel. 1300 372 842 (24 hours, 7 days)
  - Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health and Human Services Tel. 1300 761 874

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

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