



Asbestos-related Diseases: Facts for Workers in Ontario

What are asbestos-related diseases?

Asbestos-related diseases are caused by the inhalation of asbestos. Some asbestos-related diseases do not make you sick. Others can make you very sick or kill you. The most common types of asbestos-related diseases are:

- benign pleural diseases
- pleural plaques
- asbestosis
- mesothelioma
- lung cancer.

Studies also link asbestos exposure to cancers of the larynx and digestive system. The oesophagus, stomach and colon are part of the digestive system.

There is no cure for most asbestos-related diseases. However, they can be prevented. For prevention information, see the section called 'More information'.

Who gets asbestos-related diseases?

All workers exposed to airborne asbestos fibres are at risk for asbestos-related diseases. Each year, workers in Ontario continue to report asbestos-related diseases. For some, the exposure to asbestos was many years ago. Asbestos is strong and resists heat. It is found in building materials, friction goods (brakes) and insulation. Therefore, the workers most at risk are:

- construction workers who work in demolition, pipe fitters, insulation workers, boilermakers and repairers
- asbestos and talc miners
- shipyard workers
- power plant workers
- auto brake mechanics
- workers who make asbestos-containing products such as firebricks, fire-retardant paint, asbestos cement
- firefighters and other emergency rescue workers.

How do you get asbestos-related diseases?

Asbestos is a danger when it is airborne. Asbestos fibres become airborne only when handled or when asbestos-containing materials are damaged, cut or ground. Insulation or other products can break down and send asbestos fibres into the air. However, if asbestos is in a solid material, and the material is not damaged, it presents little reason for concern.

Asbestos fibres will hang (suspend) in air or water for a long time. The fibres are so tiny they are easy to breathe in (inhale) or swallow. Then they easily enter your body tissues.

Asbestos fibres are strong and stay in your body for years. When you breathe in asbestos, some fibres are trapped in your lungs. Your lungs can clear some of the fibres away, but many stay in the lungs.

As your body tries to remove the fibres, your lung tissues become inflamed. This is what leads to many asbestos-related diseases.

If you have worked with asbestos, you should tell your family doctor.

Asbestos-related diseases

Benign pleural diseases

It is not understood why some asbestos-exposed workers get one of several benign diseases of the pleura. The pleura is the lining between the lungs and the ribs. A benign condition usually does not progress and is not fatal. These conditions include:

- pleural plaques
- diffuse pleural fibrosis, and
- benign pleural effusion

Benign pleural diseases show up many years after contact with asbestos, and cause little or no trouble. Some people do not even show symptoms. But having benign pleural disease can be a sign that you may later get asbestosis or an asbestos-related cancer.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a build-up of scar tissue in your lungs. It comes from your body's effort to remove asbestos fibres that you have breathed in. The fibres inflame your lungs. You can get asbestosis in two ways:

- a lot of contact with asbestos over a short time, or
- a little contact over a long time

Shortness of breath with a cough is the main symptom of the disease. Your lungs scar and get thick. This makes it hard for your lungs to expand and contract when you breathe. Sometimes you have less blood flow to your lungs. This can make your heart grow bigger. Asbestosis can get worse. Even after you no longer have contact with asbestos, it can still make you sick or kill you.

Workers who have asbestosis can also get mesothelioma or lung cancer. There is no cure or good way to treat asbestosis. You can only treat or reduce some of the worst symptoms of the disease.

Lung cancer

Asbestos workers have a high risk of getting lung cancer. The more asbestos is inhaled, the greater the risk of getting lung cancer.

Studies show that workers who smoke and have contact with asbestos are the most likely to get lung cancer. Asbestos workers who do not smoke are still at risk of developing cancer, but the risk is not as high. As many as 30 years can go by between the first contact with asbestos and the appearance of lung cancer.

Symptoms of lung cancer are:

- chronic cough and hoarseness
- coughing up blood
- shortness of breath

If you show any of these symptoms, you must see your doctor to find out if you have lung cancer.

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer. You can get it from past contact with asbestos. This cancer usually grows in the pleura. The pleura is the lining between the lungs and the ribs. Peritoneal mesothelioma affects the lining that surrounds the stomach organs. If you've had a lot of contact with asbestos, there is a greater risk you may get peritoneal mesothelioma.

Between 15 and 50 years can go by between your first contact with asbestos and the appearance of mesothelioma. Most people get it only after 35 to 40 years. Mesothelioma will lead to death in 4 to 24 months after it is found in your body. The main symptoms of mesothelioma are pain, shortness of breath and weakness.

What happens if you think you may have an asbestos-related disease?

If you had contact with asbestos in your work, let your doctor know.

Your doctor may send you for a:

- chest x-ray or chest computed tomography (CT) scan, to see if there are lung scars
- pulmonary function test (PFT), to measure your breathing power

Workers with benign asbestos-related diseases have a greater risk of getting more serious lung diseases. They should visit their doctors regularly for check ups.

Your doctor might send you to a specialist for more tests. If so, you may see a respirologist (lung specialist) or an occupational health doctor.

Can you still work?

If you do not feel sick, you can keep working. Research tells us that if the amount of asbestos dust is kept low, you will avoid more harm to your lungs. However, your doctor may suggest that you have no more contact with asbestos dust.

You may not be able to keep working if:

- you had a lot of contact with asbestos
- you have another illness or disability

What can your employer do?

Your employer has to keep the amount of asbestos dust low. Under Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, asbestos is classified as a **designated substance** in some workplaces. The employer is required to provide safety measures when a designated substance is used. Safety measures will help to protect you and reduce your contact with asbestos at work.

Ask your employer or your joint health and safety committee, if there is one, about the asbestos control program in your workplace or about the management program for asbestos in buildings.

What can you do?

Stay informed about your health. And if you are or were in contact with asbestos at work, tell your doctor. Where the law says that a medical surveillance program is needed, you can choose to be part of it. In such cases, your employer must offer and pay for it every two years. A medical surveillance program includes:

- medical and work history tracking
- regular physical exams
- chest x-rays
- lung function tests.

Participating in a medical surveillance program can:

- help find asbestosis and other related conditions early, and
- stop them from getting worse

Your doctor or a specialist can also carry out a medical surveillance program. The doctor will follow your health more closely or refer you to a specialist.

The "Regulation Respecting Asbestos on Construction Projects and in Buildings and Repair Operations" requires the employer to report the number of hours exposed to asbestos to the Ministry of Labour Provincial Physician. If you have an asbestos-related disease, talk with your employer and file a claim with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). The WSIB will write to your doctor for a copy of your medical report to see if you're entitled to compensation.

A WSIB adjudicator will make a decision about your claim by talking to you, your employer and your doctor.

For more information about asbestos-related diseases and your workplace

- Read the material safety data sheet (MSDS) for the asbestos used in your workplace, or search the Internet for Asbestos MSDS (material safety data sheets)
- Call the Ministry of Labour for your rights under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Look up the telephone number in your local telephone directory or at www.gov.on.ca/lab/main.htm
- Ask the Canadian Centre of Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) for more information, 1-800-668-4284 or www.ccohs.ca
- Look at the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Web – Malignant mesothelioma cancerweb.ncl.ac.uk/cancernet/
- Read WSIB's Resource Sheet for Workplace Health and Safety. You can get this by calling 1-800-663-6639 or on-line at www.wsib.on.ca
- Check the Oklahoma State University Environmental Health and Safety website, www.pp.okstate.edu/ehs/training/asbestos.htm
- Check the American Lung Association web site, http://www.lungusa.org/air/air00_occupation.html#asbestos
- Read the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA's) Fact Sheet on Asbestos, www.osha-slc.gov/OshDoc/data_AsbestosFacts/asbestos-factsheet.pdf

Workplace Safety and Insurance Board

Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) plays a key role in the province's occupational health and safety system. Funded by employers, the WSIB is one of the top 10 disability insurers in North America. In addition to a strong prevention mandate, the WSIB provides insurance for injuries and illnesses incurred in workplaces covered under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act* and supports early and safe return to work for injured workers.

This information is available in several languages by calling our information hotline at 416-344-4999 toll-free 1-800-465-5606 or Telephone Service for the Deaf (TTY): 1-800-387-0050