

When is Asbestos Dangerous?

The most common way for asbestos fibers to enter the body is through breathing. In fact, asbestos containing material is not generally considered to be harmful unless it is releasing dust or fibers into the air where they can be inhaled or ingested. Many of the fibers will become trapped in the mucous membranes of the nose and throat where they can then be removed, but some may pass deep into the lungs, or, if swallowed, into the digestive tract. Once they are trapped in the body, the fibers can cause health problems.

Asbestos is most hazardous when it is **friable**. The term "friable" means that the asbestos is easily crumbled by hand, releasing fibers into the air. Asbestos-containing ceiling tiles, floor tiles, undamaged laboratory cabinet tops, shingles, fire doors, siding shingles, etc. are not highly friable and **will not typically release asbestos fibers** unless they are disturbed or damaged in some way.

Health Effects

Since it is difficult to destroy asbestos fibers, the body cannot break them down or remove them once they are lodged in lung or body tissues. There are three primary diseases associated with asbestos exposure:

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a serious, chronic, non-cancerous respiratory disease. Inhaled asbestos fibers aggravate lung tissues, which cause them to scar. The risk of asbestosis is minimal for those who do not work with asbestos; the disease is rarely caused by neighborhood or family exposure. Those who renovate or demolish buildings that contain asbestos may be at significant risk, depending on the nature of the exposure and precautions taken.

Lung Cancer

Lung cancer causes the largest number of deaths related to asbestos exposure. The incidence of lung cancer in people who are directly involved in the mining, milling, manufacturing and use of asbestos and its products is much higher than in the general population. People who have been exposed to asbestos and are also exposed to some other carcinogen -- such as cigarette smoke -- have a significantly greater risk of developing lung cancer than people who have only been exposed to asbestos. One study found that asbestos workers who smoke are about 90 times more likely to develop lung cancer than people who neither smoke nor have been exposed to asbestos.

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Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer that most often occurs in the thin membrane lining of the lungs, chest, abdomen, and (rarely) heart. People who work in asbestos mines, asbestos mills and factories, and shipyards that use asbestos, as well as people who manufacture and install asbestos insulation, have an increased risk of mesothelioma. So do people who live with asbestos workers, near asbestos mining areas, near asbestos product factories or near shipyards where use of asbestos has produced large quantities of airborne asbestos fibers.

Other Cancers

Evidence suggests that cancers in the esophagus, larynx, oral cavity, stomach, colon and kidney may be caused by ingesting asbestos. For more information on asbestos-related cancers, contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society.