

HHS Fact Sheet

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



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ASBESTOS

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring strong mineral fiber that is resistant to heat and has many desirable properties. Because asbestos fibers are resistant to heat and most chemicals, they have been used as insulation materials in many residential and commercial buildings throughout the country. Asbestos fibers are found in nature and float easily. Nearly everyone is exposed to asbestos at some time during their life.

How much asbestos causes illness?

Most people do not become ill from the asbestos they are exposed to. Asbestos exposure becomes a health concern when high concentrations of asbestos fibers are inhaled over a long time period. People who become ill from asbestos are almost always those who are exposed on a day-to-day basis in a job where they work directly with the material. As a person's exposure to fibers increases, either by breathing more fibers or by breathing fibers for a longer time, that person's risk of disease also increases. It can take anywhere from 10 to 40 years for someone to develop an asbestos-related illness after their exposure. Disease is very unlikely to result from a single, high-level exposure, or from a short period of exposure to lower levels.

What are some illnesses caused by prolonged or concentrated exposure to asbestos in the workplace?

Asbestosis - is a serious, progressive disease associated with long-term exposure to asbestos that causes damage (called 'scarring') to lung tissue. The symptoms of the disease (like shortness of breath) can be managed under the care of a doctor.

Lung cancer - Asbestos is one of the leading causes of all types of lung cancers among nonsmokers, and asbestos-exposed smokers have dramatically high rates of this disease.

Malignant mesothelioma - a rare progressive cancer of the tissue lining the chest or abdomen for which asbestos and similar fibers is the only known cause.

What are some things that can be done to limit exposure?

For the general public, the best way to avoid exposure is to avoid breathing in dust as much as possible. We do not know if all of the dust has asbestos. If there is asbestos in the dust, short-term exposures are unlikely to cause harm.

Workers involved in demolition and removal of the debris from these disasters, should wear respiratory protection (a NIOSH-approved respirator such as an N-95 or more protective respirator). It is essential that when these respirators are used, they are properly fit on the worker. Workers should wear the respirator while working inside established work zones. The respirators are not required outside of the established work zones. Additionally, there are measures that the workers within the zone can take to reduce the dust released. For example, a limited dampening of settled dust with a fine water mist can markedly reduce the amount of dust that is raised by activity. Workers should also remove dusty clothing while wearing respiratory protection and then shower completely and change into fresh clothing before going home to avoid carrying the dust into their cars or homes.

Where can a person get more information on asbestos?

For more information on asbestos and your health please call 1-888-42ATSDR or visit the Web site at <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov>. For occupational health information call 1-800-35NIOASH or <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh> on the web.

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