

Asbestos-related Diseases

People exposed to asbestos can develop diseases in later life. These most commonly affect the lungs but can also affect the lining of the abdomen. Some conditions - for example, mesothelioma or lung cancer - are more serious than others. This leaflet gives a brief overview of the diseases that are related to having an exposure to asbestos in the past.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a material that was used in buildings in the past. It is an insulating material that is both heat and fire resistant. There are different types of asbestos; white, brown and blue. Although they are all harmful, blue and brown asbestos are the most strongly linked with cancers and they have not been imported into the UK since 1985. However, they are still present in some buildings and equipment produced before the ban. White asbestos has been banned in the UK since 1999.

Asbestos materials which are left undisturbed are probably safe. It is asbestos dust or fibres which cause the harm when they are inhaled (breathed in) or ingested (swallowed).

Having a previous exposure to asbestos is associated with various different diseases. These mainly affect the lungs, and include the following.

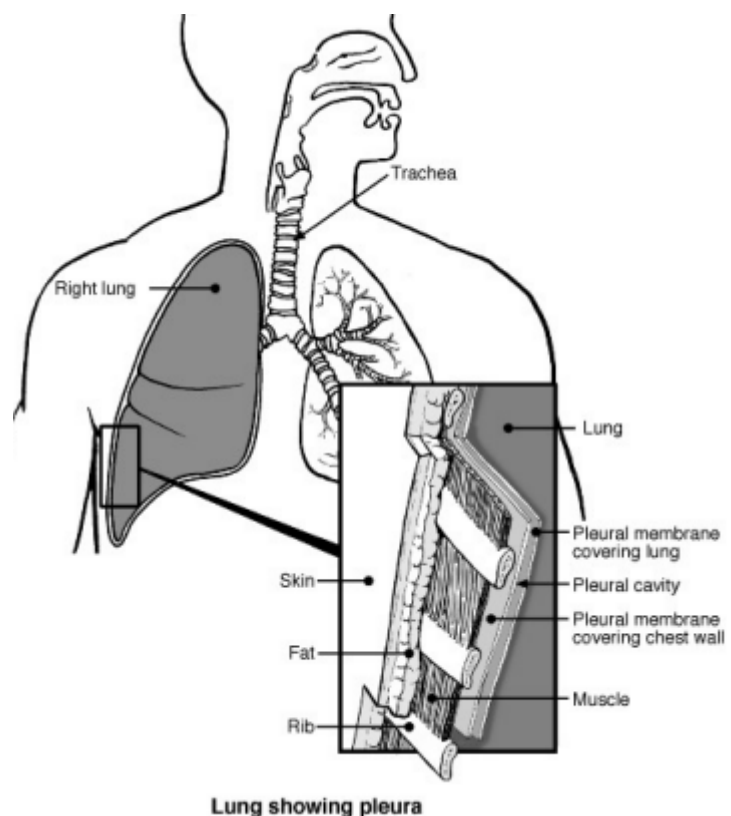
Pleural plaques

The pleura is a thin membrane with two layers. One layer lines the inside of the chest wall. The other layer covers the lungs.

Between the two layers of pleura (the pleural cavity) is a tiny amount of fluid. This acts like lubricating oil between the lungs and the chest wall as they move when you breathe.

Pleural plaques are small, raised areas or tissue which usually occur on the pleura. These are sometimes found when you have a chest X-ray for another condition.

Pleural plaques are not associated with any symptoms and do not cause illness. They are simply an indication that you have been exposed to asbestos at some time in your life.



Having pleural plaques does **not** mean that you are more likely to develop any of the other asbestos-related diseases. They are **not** a risk factor for mesothelioma or asbestosis.

Diffuse pleural thickening

Diffuse pleural thickening is a thickening of the pleura of either one or both lungs. It is

sometimes associated with a build-up of fluid in between the two layers of pleura. It most commonly leads to worsening shortness of breath and also tightness in the chest, as the lungs cannot fully expand when you breathe in.

A chest X-ray may show the diffuse pleural thickening. A CT scan and breathing tests (spirometry) may also be performed.

There is currently no treatment for diffuse pleural thickening. However, the outlook (prognosis) is often good as for many people the condition does not worsen with time.

Asbestos pleurisy or effusion

Asbestos pleurisy is inflammation of the pleura next to the lungs. This is often associated with a build-up of fluid around the lung (an effusion). This often leads to pain when you breathe in and also worsening shortness of breath.

A chest X-ray may show this condition. However, a sample of the fluid around the lungs is often taken to confirm the diagnosis. A biopsy (small sample) of the pleura may need to be taken to look at under the microscope to confirm the diagnosis.

The fluid is usually drained. It can sometimes recur in the future.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a condition that causes scarring of the lungs. Asbestosis usually develops at least twenty years after being exposed to a large amount of asbestos. The most common symptoms are shortness of breath which progressively worsens with time. In addition, a cough may be present, which is usually a dry cough.

Asbestosis is usually diagnosed from the appearance of a chest X-ray and/or a CT scan of the chest. Breathing tests (spirometry) may also be done. Occasionally, a biopsy of the lung may be needed to confirm the diagnosis.

Although asbestosis is incurable, there are different treatments available to help improve the symptoms it causes. Inhalers are often given to help with shortness of breath. It may sometimes be treated with steroid tablets and other medication.

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that occurs in the tissues which cover the lungs or abdomen. The lining around the lungs is the pleura and in the abdomen it is called the peritoneum.

See separate leaflet called '*Mesothelioma*' for more details.

Lung cancer

Asbestos exposure is a risk for all types of lung cancer. This risk is increased further if you also smoke.

See separate leaflet called '*Cancer of the Lung*' for more details.

Cancer of the larynx (throat)

Most cases of cancer of the larynx occur in people who smoke. However, a previous exposure to asbestos is also a risk factor for cancer of the larynx.

See separate leaflet called '*Cancer of the Larynx (Throat)*' for more details.

Further help and information

The Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum UK (AVSGF-UK)

Tel: 0161 636 7555 Web: www.asbestosforum.org.uk

The AVSGF-UK is an organisation representing asbestos victims support groups. Its main purpose is to work collectively to provide one voice for asbestos victims.

Mesothelioma UK

Tel: Freephone 0800 169 2409 Web: www.mesothelioma.uk.com

Mesothelioma UK provides impartial up-to-date information for patients diagnosed with mesothelioma and for their carers.

References

- [Currie GP, Watt SJ, Maskell NA](#); An overview of how asbestos exposure affects the lung. *BMJ*. 2009 Aug 24;339:b3209. doi: 10.1136/bmj.b3209.

Comprehensive patient resources are available at www.patient.co.uk

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