

THE FACTS ASBESTOS



Asbestos is classified as Group 1 carcinogen by the IARC, meaning it is seen as a definite cause of cancer in humans. Inhalation of asbestos fibres can cause chronic lung diseases like lung cancer, cancer of the lining of the lungs and lower digestive tract, and asbestosis (serious scarring condition of the lung causing progressive shortness of breath). According to the World Health Organization, approximately half of all occupational cancer deaths are caused by asbestos.

Where risks occur

The hazard may occur during performing brake or clutch repairs, renovating or demolishing buildings or ships. Or during the cleanup from those activities. The main industries where exposure occurs are shipyards and construction. Workers exposed could be working on home renovation, flooring, roofing or mechanics in industry. Other occupations at risk are shipyard workers, fire-fighters and power-plant workers.

More about the substance

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral fiber, widely used in buildings and building materials, machines, transport vehicles and consumer products (before its dangerous health effects were discovered). Asbestos is the collective term for naturally occurring silicate minerals with a crystalline structure and a fibrous character. Individual asbestos fibers cannot be seen or smelled. Asbestos fibers are released into the air during activities that disturb asbestos-containing materials.

The fibers can then be inhaled without knowing and trapped in the lungs or embedded into the digestive tract. The European Union has banned all use of asbestos as well as extraction, manufacture and processing of asbestos products.

How symptoms can affect you

Over the span of many years, asbestos fibers that are inhaled or ingested, can cause genetic changes that can lead to cancer, more specific: mesothelioma in case of asbestos exposure. Lifestyle factors (smoking, chronic stress, poor dietary habits and poor physical fitness) may affect a person's risk of developing cancer after asbestos exposure. Early symptoms of asbestos related cancer could be shortness of breath, coughing, chest pain, digestion issues and nausea.

Latency period between exposure and asbestos related cancer varies from 15 to 50 years depending on the type of cancer and lifestyle factors.

What you can do

Perform proper exposure measurements and strictly stick to the existing regulations. Inform workers about the risks and preventive measures. Investigate if the work will generate airborne fibers.

Best solution is to control exposure by elimination or substitution, for example try to plan the job without disturbing any asbestos. If it has to be disturbed, make sure the right equipment and working techniques are used by trained workers in order to minimize exposure and maximize the effectiveness of the control. Make sure the right mask and overall are used for personal protection. People with a history of asbestos exposure should seek regular health screenings and watch out for symptoms of cancer.

References: OSHA, EU-OSHA, HSE, IARC