

Asbestos

- Types**
- chrysolite (white)
 - amosite (brown)
 - crocidolite (blue)

Health Hazards

Asbestosis is a thickening and scarring reaction which produces a progressive loss of elasticity and lung function. Asbestosis is only associated with prolonged exposure to high levels or airborne fibres. The development of asbestosis is a good example of a dose response relationship

Lung cancer workers exposed to asbestos fibres have an increased risk of lung cancer, this is greatly increased if the person also smokes

Mesothelioma of the pleura is a malignant growth of the outer lining of the lung. This tumour may follow exposure to asbestos fibres (particularly blue and brown). Mesothelioma may develop any time from 15 to 50 years after the first exposure to asbestos. It is invariably fatal, usually within 2 to 3 years of onset



Summary Health Effects

It must be stressed that the potential health effects can occur only when the asbestos fibres are airborne and that asbestos products of all types which are in good condition and well sealed do not represent a significant risk unless disturbed or abraded. The fact that a person has breathed in asbestos fibres does not mean that they will develop an asbestos-related illness. The majority of people exposed will never suffer any effect. The likelihood of an individual contracting a disease related to asbestos exposure depends on the concentration of asbestos to which they are exposed, the duration of exposure and their own susceptibility

However for lung cancer and mesothelioma the precise relationship between exposure and likelihood of disease is not clear. Despite many studies a wide range of estimates has resulted and a considerable uncertainty exists. There is little doubt that at levels of exposure found in the general environment, the risks are very low. However, it is not possible to define a level which can be guaranteed to be safe. Blue and brown asbestos are particularly implicated in the development of both mesothelioma and lung cancer. In particular deaths from mesothelioma have been reported after minimal exposure.

This uncertainty has led many people to conclude that all asbestos irrespective of its type, location and conditions must be removed. This can cause unwarranted concern and massive unjustified expenditure. In many cases the risks caused by removal may be greater than if the material were left in place and properly sealed.

It is important therefore that a valid assessment is made in any situation to ensure that asbestos is dealt with in the most appropriate manner.