

Labor Department's Asbestos

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a group of naturally occurring minerals. The three most common types of asbestos are:

- a) chrysotile
- b) amosite
- c) crocidolite

Asbestos is commonly used as an acoustic insulator, thermal insulation, fire proofing and in other building materials. Asbestos fibers are incredibly strong and have properties that make them resistant to heat. Asbestos is often found in ceiling tiles, pipe and vessel insulation, blown on to structural beams and ceilings, in floor tile, linoleum and mastic.

2. Why is asbestos a hazard?

Asbestos is made up of microscopic bundles of fibers that may become airborne when disturbed. These fibers get into the air and may become inhaled into the lungs, where they may cause significant health problems. Researchers still have not determined a "safe level" of exposure but we know the greater and the longer the exposure, the greater the risk of developing an asbestos related disease. Some asbestos related diseases include:

- a) Asbestosis - a lung disease first found in Naval shipyard workers. As asbestos fibers are inhaled, they may become trapped in the lung tissue. The body tries to dissolve the fibers by producing an acid. This acid, due to the chemical resistance of the fiber, does little to damage the fiber, but may scar the surrounding tissue. Eventually, this scarring may become so severe that the lungs cannot function. The latency period (meaning the time it takes for the disease to develop) is often 25-40 years.
- b) Mesothelioma - a cancer of the pleura (the outer lining of the lung) and/or the peritoneum (the lining of the abdominal wall). The only known cause of mesothelioma is from asbestos exposure. The latency period for mesothelioma is often 15-30 years.
- c) Cancer - caused by asbestos. The effects of lung cancer are often greatly increased by cigarette smoking (by about 50%). Cancer of the gastrointestinal tract can also be caused by asbestos. The latency period for cancer is often 15-30 years.

Despite the common misconception, asbestos does not cause headaches, sore muscles or other immediate symptoms such as allergies. Although asbestos does not cause allergies, dust created during common renovation activities that often result in disturbance of asbestos, can aggravate allergies. As mentioned above, the effects of asbestos exposure often go unnoticed for 15-40 years.

3. When is asbestos a hazard?

Asbestos is not always an immediate hazard. In fact, if asbestos can be maintained in good condition, it is