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What is asbestos?

Asbestos is the name for a group of naturally occurring minerals that separate into strong, very fine fibers. The fibers are heat and fire resistant and extremely durable. Because of these qualities, asbestos has been used in over 3,500 building and consumer products. Since the turn of the century, 30 million tons of asbestos has been used in homes, schools and workplaces throughout the United States. Most homes built or remodeled between 1950 and 1979 contain some kind of asbestos material. Asbestos is still used in some products, but federal and state laws and regulations prohibit asbestos from being used in most construction materials.

Why is asbestos a problem?

Asbestos tends to break down into a dust of microscopic size fibers unless it is completely sealed into a product. A single fiber of asbestos magnified 1,000 times looks slightly larger than a strand of human hair. Because of the size and shape, these tiny fibers remain suspended in the air for long periods of time. When inhaled or ingested, the fibers can easily penetrate the body tissues. Because of their durability, these fibers can remain in the body for many years and can cause a number of different diseases.

What diseases are associated with asbestos?

Asbestos exposure can cause disabling and sometimes fatal diseases. Among the most common asbestos-caused diseases are:

Mesothelioma - a cancer of the membranes lining the lungs, chest or abdomen. It is only caused by exposure to asbestos and it is almost always fatal.

Lung and Other Cancers - including cancers of the tongue, sinuses, mouth, larynx, throat, stomach, colon, rectum, intestine, kidney, pancreas and gallbladder can occur as a result of exposure to asbestos.

Asbestosis - a scarring of the lung tissue or the linings of the lung which can reduce lung function and make breathing difficult. Once the scarring has begun, asbestosis is irreversible. Asbestosis victims can develop complications which can be fatal such as heart disease and lung infections.

What are some the symptoms associated with asbestos disease?

Symptoms of asbestos-caused disease generally do not appear for **10-35** years after the first exposure to asbestos. Therefore, long before its effects are detectable, asbestos-related injury to the body may have already occurred. If you develop any of the following symptoms, you should see a doctor without delay:

- *shortness of breath
- *blood in the sputum (fluid) coughed up from the lungs
- *difficulty in swallowing or prolonged hoarseness
- *chronic cough/change in cough pattern
- *pain in the chest or abdomen
- *significant weight loss

Tell your doctor if you believe you were exposed to asbestos. A thorough physical examination, including a chest x-ray and lung function tests, may be recommended.

Is there a safe level of exposure to asbestos?

There is no known safe level of exposure to asbestos and all varieties of asbestos can cause disease. This does not mean that if you breathe asbestos fibers you will get a disease, but your risk of developing a serious disease does increase with each exposure. **And if you smoke, your chances of developing asbestos-related lung cancer are 50-90 times greater than non-smokers.**