

Occupational Lung Disease - Asbestosis and Mesothelioma



Occupational lung diseases are conditions of the respiratory system caused by workplace exposure to dusts, gases, fumes, vapours, mists and microorganisms.

What diseases can exposure to asbestos cause?

If a worker is exposed to, and breathes in asbestos fibres, they could develop:

- asbestosis
- cancers of the lung and other organs, including mesothelioma.

What is asbestosis?

Asbestosis is a chronic lung disease caused by inhaling asbestos fibres.

What is mesothelioma?

Mesothelioma is a chronic disease (cancer) affecting the mesothelial cells which cover most internal organs. There are two main types of mesothelioma: pleural (lung) and peritoneal (lining of the abdomen).

Mesothelioma is caused by exposure to asbestos and can take many years to develop.

What causes asbestosis and mesothelioma?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral and can typically be found in rock, sediment or soil.

Asbestos was used in building, construction and insulation around Australia until the late 1980's. A national ban on the use of asbestos came into effect in December 2003.

Asbestos contains microscopic fibres that can enter the air when asbestos containing material is cut or ground. Inhaled fibres get trapped in the lungs and can cause scarring and stiffening.

Who is at risk of asbestosis?

Asbestosis is a chronic disease that can affect workers who have been exposed to asbestos over a long period. You and your workers may be at risk if you work in mining, are a builder or working in the construction industry (including plumbers, insulators, electricians) your business conducts fireproofing, pipe lagging, with insulation or roofing, you work at a shipyard, wharf or power station, or you and your workers deal with cement manufacturing or in the automotive industry like mechanics.

If workers smoke, as well as breathe in asbestos, they are at greater risk of lung cancer.



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What must you do as a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU)?

A total ban on asbestos came into effect in Australia in 2003. It is illegal to make it, use it or import it from another country. However, asbestos is still found in existing buildings and can be exposed during construction work and maintenance.

Workers must not handle asbestos unless they have been trained and hold a licence that is current and appropriate for the type of work being done.

PCBUs must eliminate workers' exposure to asbestos, or if this is not reasonably practicable, a PCBU must keep worker exposure to asbestos as low as reasonably practicable.

PCBUs must also ensure that the workplace exposure standard for airborne asbestos fibres is not exceeded. The exposure standard for asbestos is a respirable fibre level of 0.1 fibres/mL of air measured in a person's breathing zone and expressed as an average fibre concentration over an eight-hour working day.

References:

<https://www.svhlunghealth.com.au/conditions/asbestosis>

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/asbestos>

<https://www.cancer.org.au/cancer-information/causes-and-prevention/workplace-cancer/asbestos>

[Model Code of Practice: How to manage and control asbestos in the workplace | Safe Work Australia](#)

[Model Code of Practice: How to safely remove asbestos | Safe Work Australia](#)

Further information:

Under the model WHS Regulations, PCBUs have specific duties to eliminate exposure to airborne asbestos at the workplace. If this is not reasonably practicable, exposure must be minimised so far as is reasonably practicable. Contact your [WHS regulator](#) to find out the laws that apply in your state or territory