



Atlantic County Division of Public Health

Questions and Answers about Asbestos

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is the name applied to a family of strong, flexible fibrous minerals. It does not easily burn or react with other chemicals. Asbestos has no odor or taste. There are several different types of asbestos: chrysotile (white), the most common; crocidolite (blue); amosite (brown); and anthrophillite (gray).

How is asbestos used?

Asbestos has been used in insulation wrapped around hot water pipes and boilers, fireproof materials, roof materials, car brakes, clutches and transmissions, paper products, textiles, cement pipes and reinforced plastics.

Could I be exposed to asbestos?

Air - in the city or the country - contains small amounts of asbestos in levels that do not appear to cause any harm. Asbestos fibers get into the air when products containing asbestos - for example, roof shingles, insulation, floor and ceiling tiles and brakes and clutches - wear out.

Could I be exposed to a large amount of asbestos?

People who work with asbestos day after day without proper protection - for example, miners, automobile brake mechanics and insulation workers - are likely to be exposed to much higher concentrations of asbestos in the air than other people.

Can asbestos get inside my body? Does it stay there?

When you breathe in asbestos fibers, some of them land on the cells that make up your lungs and airways. Most of the fibers end up in mucous that coats the lungs and are brought up or coughed up into the throat and swallowed, within a few hours. Most swallowed asbestos fibers leave the body through the feces within a few days. Some fibers stick inside the lung cells and lodge even deeper, where they may stay for a lifetime. Very few fibers get into the body through the skin, even if you come into contact with asbestos.

What are the health effects if I am exposed to asbestos?

There are no known immediate effects at the time of exposure. Asbestos does not cause allergies, headache, burning eyes, sore throat or skin problems. In general, asbestos-related lung disease results only from intense asbestos exposure experienced over a period of many years, primarily as a consequence of occupational exposures. The risk of developing an asbestos-related illness following an exposure of short duration, even to high levels, is very low.

When asbestos causes health problems, it is many years - perhaps 20 to 40 - after you are exposed. People who were exposed to high levels of asbestos in the workplace over a long period of time have an increased chance of getting certain diseases, including lung cancer, digestive tract cancer, mesothelioma (a cancer that starts in tissues lining the lung or abdominal cavity) and asbestosis (a scarring disease of the lungs).

How much asbestos does it take to cause those diseases?

Whether or not asbestos exposure will cause disease depends upon how long a person is exposed to asbestos, how long it has been since the person's exposure began and whether the person smokes cigarettes.



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Can a medical test show whether I have been exposed to asbestos?

No. A chest X-ray can show early signs of lung disease, but will not show asbestos fibers. Testing can identify the presence of asbestos fibers in phlegm and other fluids from the lung and in urine and feces. But since nearly everyone breathes in a little asbestos, nearly everyone has a few fibers in their body fluids and body wastes. These tests cannot tell how serious your asbestos exposure is or whether you are likely to suffer health effects.

Could a one-time incident that exposes me to asbestos - such as a burst steam pipe - affect my health?

The amount of asbestos released in a one-time incident is not likely to affect your health. It will most likely not expose you to much more asbestos, over the long run, than you would be exposed to from the air we all breathe. Still, if you are involved in an asbestos incident, it makes sense to reduce your exposure to asbestos. If asbestos has been released near where you live, turn off all air conditioners, shut off ventilation systems that use outside air and close the windows. You might be also asked to either go to a decontamination trailer that is sometimes brought to asbestos-release sites, so that asbestos can be removed from your body and clothing, or to simply take a shower.

Can tests show if there is asbestos in materials, in the air and on surfaces?

Yes. Trained responders inspect the area and sample the materials to be tested for asbestos, take air samples to determine the concentration of asbestos fibers and take "wipe" samples by pressing an adhesive tape against surfaces and then testing the tape to find out how much asbestos is stuck onto it.

Do these tests show how much asbestos is in the environment and whether there should be a special asbestos clean-up?

No. Even if there is a lot of asbestos in the material, there may not be much in the environment. "Wipe" samples can only detect the presence of asbestos and wipe sample results cannot determine amounts of asbestos inhaled or the health risk. The concentration of asbestos in the air is the only measure that can help estimate people's exposure to asbestos.

How do I get asbestos off of me and my things after it has gotten on them?

To clean asbestos from:	Do this:
People	Take a shower at home or in a decontamination trailer.
Clothes	Rinse with running water from a hose or faucet prior to cleaning in a washing machine.
Pets	Clean with running water from a hose or faucet.
Foods	<i>Throw away</i> any food that may have been contaminated with asbestos, except for food in cans, jars or containers with tight-fitting lids. Just wash the can or jar with water and wipe it clean. If in doubt, throw it out.
Plants	Rinse leaves with water and replace the potting soil.
Rugs and carpets	HEPA* vacuuming.
Furniture	HEPA* vacuuming.
Air conditioners	HEPA* vacuuming.
Cars, vehicles, bicycles	HEPA* vacuuming.

*HEPA stands for High Efficiency Particulate Air filter, used in a type of vacuuming that removes very tiny particles.



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How dangerous is asbestos exposure compared to other health risks?

Minimal exposure to asbestos is not very dangerous - *unless* you are *both* exposed to asbestos on the job and you smoke. If you have both risks, the risk that you will get one of the diseases is much higher than you would expect from simply adding up the asbestos risk and the smoking risk.

For people without both risks, there is very little danger. A Harvard University study found that out of every 100,000 premature deaths, smoking is responsible for 21,900 deaths; car accidents cause 1,600; medical X-rays, 75; lightning, 3; and exposure to asbestos in buildings, only an estimated one death. And a 1990 article in *Science*, a respected "peer-reviewed" professional journal, stated, "Chrysotile asbestos, the type of fiber found predominantly in U.S. schools and buildings, is not a health risk in the non-occupational environmental environment." The American Medical Association concluded in 1991 that asbestos in buildings is far less of a health risk to the people living in them than smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, poor diet and too little exercise.

How do I protect myself against asbestos disease?

The best protection is to make sure you breathe as few asbestos fibers as possible. If you think there may be asbestos in material where you live - for example, in the boiler room, on hot water pipes or behind the radiator - and it is in one piece and not crumbling - it is best to leave it alone. Trying to remove it will only release asbestos fibers into the air. If the material is already broken up, first spray water on it to dampen it, then clean it up from the floor, window sill or table.

In an emergency, call the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222.

Information compiled from the New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene