

What are the symptoms of asbestos-related disease?

If you've been exposed to asbestos you should tell your doctor. He or she will examine you and may refer you for tests, for example, a chest x-ray or lung function test. If you smoke, you should stop, since smoking can greatly increase your chance of developing asbestos-related lung cancer.

You should see your doctor if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- shortness of breath
- a cough or change in the way you cough
- blood in the sputum you cough up from your lungs
- pain in your chest or abdomen
- difficulty in swallowing or prolonged hoarseness
- significant weight loss.

Pleural plaque

Pleural plaque is not cancer, and it doesn't cause cancer. It takes at least 7 years to develop after asbestos exposure. It's quite common, generally causes no symptoms and generally requires no treatment. It may cause a dull pain or, in rare cases, make you short of breath.

A plaque is a thickened patch, known as 'fibrosis', on the pleura. The pleura is the 2 layers of membrane that line the chest wall and cover the lungs.

While pleural plaque shows that you may have been exposed to asbestos, pleural thickening can also be caused by a lung infection.

If you have pleural plaque, it's important that you stop smoking. You need to see your doctor for regular check-ups and have a chest x-ray every 3 to 5 years. You may also need to have a lung function test.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is not cancer but is a serious disease. It takes 10 years or more after asbestos exposure to develop. It causes scarring of the lungs and may lead to disability or even death.

When asbestos fibres stay deep in the lungs, scar tissue forms around them, and this may grow over years. The scar tissue can be seen on a chest x-ray. It stops oxygen moving into the bloodstream, so the person with asbestosis feels out of breath. The doctor will also hear 'crackles' in your chest—a bit like the sound made by rubbing hair between your fingers. These are signs of scar tissue in the lungs.

Asbestosis slowly progresses over time. Some treatments can help to improve quality of life. Extra oxygen can help some people—you should discuss this with your doctor.

Asbestosis usually develops in asbestos workers who have had a lot of exposure, so new cases in Australia are becoming uncommon. People with asbestosis may also develop lung cancer.

Lung cancer

[Lung cancer](#) may not develop until decades or more after exposure, and is much more likely to develop in smokers and people with asbestosis.

If you have been exposed to asbestos and you smoke, your risk of getting lung cancer is very high—perhaps as much as 90 times that of non-smokers who've not been exposed to asbestos. If you've been exposed to asbestos, you can probably reduce your risk if you stop smoking. The risk continues to fall the longer you don't smoke.

Mesothelioma

This is a cancer that's very strongly linked to asbestos exposure, occurring more frequently in Australia than anywhere else in the world. Mesotheliomas can take 30 or 40 years after exposure to asbestos fibres to develop. The most common type starts in the pleura (the 2 layers of membrane that line the chest wall and cover the lungs).

Mesothelioma may occur in one or more places over the pleura. It forms growths shaped like small pieces of cauliflower. They grow and spread gradually to surrounding areas.

If asbestos fibres are 'breathed into' the stomach, they may also work their way through the stomach wall and cause mesothelioma in the lining of the abdomen (peritoneum). Occasionally, mesothelioma arises in the membrane around the heart or the reproductive organs.

Symptoms of mesothelioma

The cancer causes cells in the pleura to produce fluid, called a pleural effusion. The fluid builds up between the 2 layers of pleura and presses on the lungs. This causes shortness of breath and a dry cough, and can also be painful. As the cancer progresses, it can grow into the lung, lymph nodes, chest wall and ribs.

Mesothelioma in the peritoneum ('peritoneal mesothelioma') causes pain and a swollen abdomen, sometimes with nausea, vomiting, fever or bowel or urinary problems.

In both types, other symptoms may appear later, including severe weight loss, spitting up sputum or blood, difficulty swallowing and a hoarse voice.

Treatment for mesothelioma

There's no proven cure for mesothelioma, but new research findings have recently resulted in better symptom relief and longer survival. The main aim of treatment is to keep quality of life as good as possible for as long as possible.

Some people's outlook is better than others, and occasionally doctors from the larger cancer centres can recommend more effective therapies that have tolerable side effects.

Your decision about treatment will depend on how far your cancer has progressed, what you prefer and what your doctor suggests. Blood tests and scans such as positron emission tomography (PET) or computed tomography (CT) may help to show which treatment is most suitable for you.

All treatments have good and bad points and risks, and you should talk these over with your doctor. Different specialists may have different opinions about the right treatment for you. You may like to get a second opinion from a specialist who treats large numbers of people with mesothelioma, as part of a multidisciplinary team at a major cancer treatment hospital.