

Mesothelioma

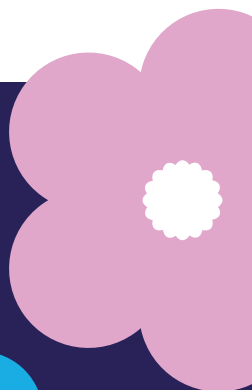
A guide to this
asbestos cancer



MESOTHELIOMA UK

www.mesothelioma.uk.com

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Introduction

This booklet is for anyone who wants to find out more about mesothelioma.

It gives an overview of:

- What it is
- Causes, specifically asbestos exposure
- How it is diagnosed
- Different types of mesothelioma
- Treatment options
- Living with mesothelioma
- Further help and support

What is mesothelioma?

Mesothelioma is a cancer of the mesothelium, a thin lining (membrane) that covers some of the body's internal organs. It also lines some of the spaces (cavities) within the body, such as the chest and abdomen.

Mesothelioma most commonly affects the lining of the lungs (pleural mesothelioma). However, it can also affect the lining of the abdomen (peritoneal mesothelioma), heart (pericardial mesothelioma) or testicles.

Mesothelioma can cause shortness of breath, tiredness, coughing, pain, loss of appetite and weight loss.

Exposure to asbestos is responsible for up to 9 out of 10 mesothelioma cases. Although the disease was described in the medical literature in the late 1800s, a definite link with asbestos exposure was not reported until 1960. Regulations to ban asbestos did not begin in the UK until 1985.

Mesothelioma is a relatively rare cancer, and not everyone who is exposed to asbestos will develop it. In the United Kingdom, approximately 2,700 people a year are diagnosed.

What causes mesothelioma?

Exposure to asbestos is the most common cause of mesothelioma.

It is likely that everyone breathes in asbestos fibres at some point, as very low levels are present in the air around us. However, some people have a greater risk of developing mesothelioma; this may be because their exposure has been much higher. For example, people who work in the construction industry are more likely to be diagnosed with mesothelioma.

Exposure is not limited to those who have worked directly with asbestos. It can also be para-occupational; perhaps taken out of the workplace

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on the clothes of someone working with asbestos.

Exposure can also be environmental, for example, living near an asbestos factory or in a building containing asbestos. Similarly, asbestos remains present in many public buildings and people working in occupations not traditionally linked to asbestos exposure may have an increased risk. These include healthcare workers and school workers.

Other suggested causes include exposure to a mineral called erionite, which has been found in Turkey and North America. However, this and other rare causes are not yet fully understood.

Some people may have a

higher chance of developing mesothelioma if they inherited certain genes from their parent(s). However, even with a genetic predisposition, exposure to asbestos is still considered to be a key factor.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral. There are three main types, blue (crocidolite), brown (amosite) and white (chrysotile).

All types of asbestos are harmful, but blue and brown asbestos are the most hazardous and have not been imported into the UK since 1985. White asbestos was only banned in the UK in 1999.

Asbestos may still be present in buildings and

equipment produced before the ban.

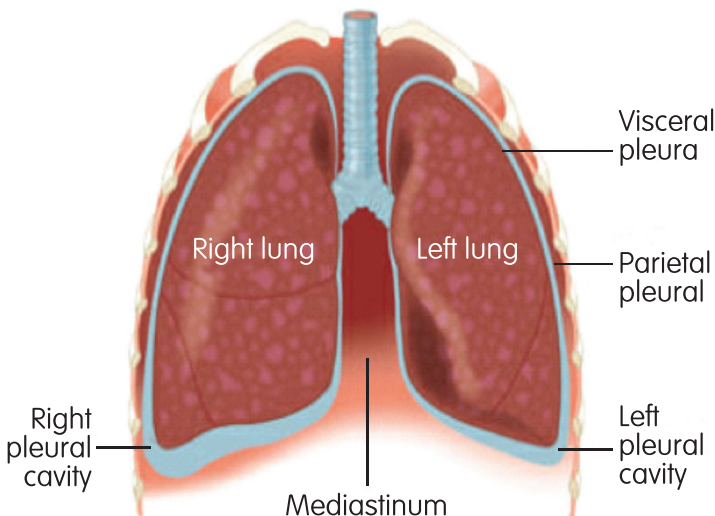
Whilst asbestos should always be treated with care, it is not usually a problem unless it is disturbed or damaged.

If you are concerned about asbestos you should contact the local council in your area or see the information produced by the Health and Safety

Executive (HSE)
www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos

How does asbestos cause mesothelioma?

Dust and fibres from asbestos can cause harm when inhaled or ingested. If these fibres lodge in the lung, they can affect the membranes lining the inside of the chest wall and the surface of the lung (pleura). This can cause **pleural mesothelioma**.



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Pleural mesothelioma causes the pleura to thicken. This thickening of the pleura might begin to press onto the lungs or attach itself to the inside of the chest wall. In either case the expansion of the lung becomes progressively restricted by the tumour.

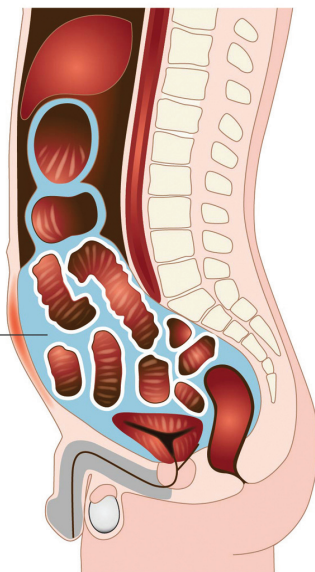
Fluid, sometimes several litres, can collect between the two layers of the pleura.

This affects the lungs ability to expand and causes the person to feel breathless. This is known as a pleural effusion.

Asbestos fibres in the abdomen can lodge in the lining (peritoneum) causing **peritoneal mesothelioma**.

Peritoneal mesothelioma causes the layers of the peritoneum to thicken.

Abnormal accumulation of abdominal fluids (ascites)



Fluid may also collect between them, this is known as ascites.

Peritoneal mesothelioma is much rarer. There is approximately one case of peritoneal mesothelioma to every 12 cases of pleural mesothelioma.

Mesothelioma can also occur in the linings of the testicles (tunica vaginalis) and the heart (pericardial mesothelioma) these are both extremely rare forms of the disease.

How is mesothelioma diagnosed?

It can take many years after being exposed to asbestos for mesothelioma to occur.

The length of time taken is referred to as the latency period and is usually

between 10 and 50 years.

The earliest signs of the disease can be quite vague. The most common symptoms are breathlessness, chest pain, fatigue and weight loss.

Initial investigations are usually performed by a GP, who will ask about risk factors, particularly your work history and any known asbestos exposure. The GP is likely to recommend additional tests such as an X-ray or CT-scan.

These tests will help doctors see whether there are any signs of mesothelioma, such as thickening of the pleura.

If the tests do find something, it is likely a biopsy will be performed which can confirm a

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diagnosis. Sometimes it can take quite a few investigations and hospital visits to diagnose the disease.

Treatment for mesothelioma

The treatment of mesothelioma depends on a number of things. This includes the type of mesothelioma as well as how advanced it is. Personal preferences as well as a person's general fitness will also be taken into account.

Options to treat mesothelioma and control any symptoms include palliative care, radiotherapy, surgery and drug treatment such as chemotherapy. None offer a cure but they aim to reduce symptoms and

maximise quality and length of life.

Clinical trials

Some, often newer treatments, are available to people taking part in research studies called clinical trials.

Clinical trials are carried out to try to find new and better treatments. Many drugs and treatments that have been tested in clinical trials are now in common use.

Not all the drugs tested in trials are successful and not all people taking part benefit. However the findings still advance understanding, and add to the current knowledge about effective treatments.

Ask your consultant or specialist nurse if you

would like to find out more.

Living with mesothelioma

Having a diagnosis of mesothelioma can be overwhelming, and it affects people in many ways. This can be in a practical, everyday way, but it can also affect how they feel about their life, relationships, work and finances.

Talking can be really helpful. For a lot of people, talking to friends and family is enough, but for some, talking to a professional is easier and feels safer. Professionals include doctors, nurses, counsellors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, or people who provide

complementary therapies such as massage, reflexology or relaxation.

You can also ask your nurse or your cancer information centre if there are any local support groups. Support groups provide guidance and information and are a place where you can meet other people with mesothelioma who may be able to understand how you are feeling.

Benefits and compensation

If you have been given a diagnosis of mesothelioma you may be able to claim welfare benefits and lump sum compensation from the government. This applies even if you have a high household income or savings. Your local support

group or Mesothelioma UK will be able to answer any questions and also help with the process of applying for benefits and, if appropriate, pursuing a compensation claim.

“Living with mesothelioma can sometimes cause us to worry too much about the future. I admit that earlier on in my diagnosis, I didn’t believe I had much of a future.

However, one thing I have learned from surrounding myself with a lot of positive people is that nobody knows what the future holds for any of us.”

Chris

Mesothelioma UK

Mesothelioma UK is a charity for anyone affected by mesothelioma.

It supports people with mesothelioma to live better and live longer and to prevent mesothelioma happening to future generations.

They do this by advocating for better treatment and care, enhancing quality of life, championing research and amplifying the patient's voice.

If you need information, support, help with benefits or compensation, or would like to speak to a nurse who is an expert in mesothelioma, we can help you.



Mesothelioma UK

provides specialist,
impartial, up to
date support and
information.



To sponsor or donate contact: Mesothelioma UK

CIO Registered Charity Number 1177039

Email | info@mesothelioma.uk.com

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This title was previously called [What is Mesothelioma?](#)

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