

What is Asbestosis?

Asbestosis is a progressive pulmonary disease. This disease is particularly dangerous because symptoms only appear after asbestos fibers have already caused irreversible lung damage. While avoiding asbestos exposure can prevent the condition from worsening, it cannot reverse the damage that has already been done. People who develop asbestosis as a result of asbestos exposure will be affected by the condition for the rest of their lives.

Asbestosis & Asbestos

Four out of every 10,000 Americans suffer from asbestosis, a disease strictly caused by exposure to asbestos. An average of 10,000 deaths a year in the United States are caused by asbestos-related diseases such as asbestosis. The majority of these victims worked in at-risk occupations during the mid to late twentieth century. Due to the extended latency period associated with asbestos-related illnesses, those who worked in at-risk occupations will continue to develop such diseases for the next several decades.

Causes of Asbestosis

Asbestosis is caused by breathing in tiny asbestos fibers. Once inhaled into the lungs, these fibers cannot be destroyed or expelled by the body. They remain embedded in the lung tissue and cause chronic irritation and inflammation. Over time, as this irritation continues, scar tissue develops and replaces healthy lung tissue. Scar tissue is inflexible and cannot contract and expand, which leads to symptoms of asbestosis.

Symptoms of Asbestosis

Symptoms of asbestosis begin to appear when lung function has been damaged by asbestos exposure. One of the first signs of asbestosis is when breathing has become noticeably difficult. Many asbestosis patients compare the symptoms they experience to those of asthma. Generally, the first symptom of asbestosis is shortness of breath during physical exertion. As the condition worsens, shortness of breath may be experienced even when resting. Other symptoms of asbestosis include painful breathing and coughing. For severe cases medications and even continuous oxygen may be prescribed, severely impacting quality of life.

Some of the most common symptoms of asbestosis are:

- Shortness of breath
- Coughing
- Pain when breathing
- Finger Clubbing
- Inability to do physical labor

These symptoms start slowly. At first, you may notice a shortness of breath during physical activity. Most people do not realize that chest pain and coughing is a symptom of asbestosis because it can be attributed to other conditions, such as a common cold or heartburn. As the symptoms intensify, it becomes difficult to breathe and impossible to do physical labor. The biggest mistake people make regarding asbestosis is not seeing their doctor soon enough. With the proper care and removal of asbestos from your life, the condition will not worsen and can even improve. However, most people with asbestosis catch it in a very late stage. If you have been exposed to asbestos, talk to the doctor at the first sign of shortness of breath or chest pain.

Diagnosis of Asbestosis

Diagnosis of asbestosis first requires that the patient gives their doctor a full medical history, including details of any known asbestos exposure. If previously exposed to asbestos, this information is crucial to ensure a correct diagnosis. To diagnose asbestosis, the doctor will first use a stethoscope to listen to the lungs. If the lungs are affected, they may hear a dry crackling sound when you breathe. However, the detection of this

symptom is not enough to diagnose asbestosis. To diagnose the condition correctly, several other tests are required, which may include a pulmonary function test, chest x-ray, and CT scan. These are used to diagnose asbestosis, and may also be used for screening purposes to detect asbestosis in people who have not yet developed symptoms of the disease. While the asbestos fibers themselves do not appear on x-rays and scans, the scarring the fibers cause is readily apparent.

Treatment for Asbestosis

There is no cure for asbestosis, and no treatments that can reverse the lung damage caused by exposure to asbestos. Asbestosis treatments are designed to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life for people with asbestosis. Treatments for asbestosis are split into three main categories: surgical treatments, drugs, and alternative treatments. Additionally, oxygen may be prescribed.

Surgical Treatment

Surgery for asbestosis includes both diagnostic and treatment procedures. Treatment procedures are typically carried out to ease the symptoms of the disease, rather than to cure it. However, for patients with very severe asbestosis, a lung transplant may be considered.

Drugs

Drug treatments for asbestosis include pain medication, bronchodilators, and antibiotics. Bronchodilators are prescribed to help ease shortness of breath. These work by relaxing the airways so that more air can be inhaled into the lungs. Bronchodilators for asbestosis are similar in design to those used by asthmatics. Pain medications for asbestosis include over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol, and prescription medications. People with asbestosis will also receive antibiotic treatment to reduce the risks of infection.

Alternative Treatments

As with other types of asbestosis treatment, alternative treatments cannot provide a cure. However, many patients find treatments such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbal medicine help relieve symptoms of the disease.

Complications of Asbestosis

People with asbestosis may also develop dangerous complications that occur as a result of reduced lung function. These include high blood pressure, heart disease, and buildup of fluid in the lungs. In addition, people who have developed asbestosis may be at risk of other asbestos-related diseases such as mesothelioma cancer.

Veterans and Asbestosis Disability

As with any medical condition, the first test that must be satisfied is whether the majority of the veteran's asbestos exposure was "more likely than not" received from their military service. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will look at potential military service exposure, as well as pre and post-military exposure and attempt to determine whether the veteran received the majority of their exposure inside or outside the military.

If the VA does establish this "service connection", the next test that must be satisfied is the severity of the disability. To evaluate this, the VA uses the results of a Pulmonary Function Test. The two tests that the VA accepts are the Forced Vital Capacity (FVC) test and the Diffusion Capacity of the Lung for Carbon Monoxide by the Single Breath Method (DLCO (SB)). These tests produce lung capacity results in terms of a percentage of a predicted value. For lung capacities less than or equal to 80%, the VA pays disability compensation payments to the veteran monthly. The VA currently rates asbestosis as well as other related diseases such as asbestos fibrosis, pleural plaque and pleural effusions using the same criteria below:

General Rating Formula for Interstitial Lung Disease:

Forced Vital Capacity (FVC) less than 50-percent predicted, or; Diffusion Capacity of the Lung for Carbon Monoxide by the Single Breath Method (DLCO (SB)) less than 40 percent predicted, or; maximum exercise capacity less than 15 ml/kg/min oxygen consumption with cardio respiratory limitation, or; cor pulmonale or pulmonary hypertension, or; requires outpatient oxygen therapy 100%

FVC of 50- to 64-percent predicted, or; DLCO (SB) of 40- to 55-percent predicted, or; maximum exercise capacity of 15 to 20 ml/kg/min oxygen consumption with cardio respiratory limitation 60%

FVC of 65- to 74-percent predicted, or; DLCO (SB) of 56- to 65-percent predicted 30%

FVC of 75- to 80-percent predicted, or; DLCO (SB) of 66- to 80-percent predicted 10%