

ASBESTOS FACTS ¹

What is the health risk from exposure to asbestos?

Health risks from asbestos depend on a number of factors:

- the amount of asbestos fibres in the air
- how long your exposure lasts
- how often you were exposed
- the size of the asbestos fibres (they must be small enough to be breathed in)
- the amount of time since your first exposure
- the type of asbestos fibre.

People are more likely to experience asbestos-related diseases when they are exposed to higher concentrations of asbestos, are exposed frequently and over long periods of time.

The risk of developing asbestos-related diseases is very low for low-level short-term exposure [...]. This is because the risk of disease is directly related to the amount of asbestos and length of exposure. Short-term low-level exposure in the home is likely to pose negligible risk of disease.

Asbestos-related diseases generally occur in workers who have had heavy exposure over extended periods of time, such as people engaged in the manufacture of asbestos-containing material.

What happens when you are exposed to asbestos?

The main exposure to asbestos is from breathing in airborne asbestos fibres, some of which may get trapped in your lungs. Most fibres are removed from your lungs by the body's defences. Levels of fibres in lung tissue build up over time, but some fibres, particularly chrysotile (white asbestos), can be removed with time.

How long is it before any health effect from asbestos exposure would occur?

Asbestos-related diseases take many years, usually decades, to develop. Symptoms developing within months of exposure are unlikely to be related to asbestos.

How much asbestos is safe, if any?

The risk of disease depends on how much exposure occurred and over what time period. No specific dose can be determined because everyone will have different susceptibility, and different risk

¹ From Ministry of Health. www.health.govt.nz > asbestos advice

factors. For example, people who are frequently exposed to asbestos, and who smoke, are at a much greater risk of lung cancer.

Most people who develop asbestos-related disease have had occupational exposure to asbestos. Examples are people who often routinely encountered asbestos in their daily work, such as electricians and plumbers. People who have developed asbestos-related disease (usually mesothelioma) but who do not appear to have been exposed at work, nearly all seem to have either been regularly exposed to asbestos brought home on the work clothing of someone else or to have undertaken maintenance or renovation on asbestos-containing materials.

In developed countries like New Zealand, most concerns about asbestos are for people who were heavily exposed to asbestos in their workplaces, prior to the 1980s.

Exposure to all forms of asbestos at sufficiently high concentrations of airborne fibres over long periods increases the risk of asbestos-related diseases. The risk from exposure to asbestos in the non-occupational setting is generally considered to be low because the concentrations of airborne asbestos fibres are low and people are not exposed very often, compared with asbestos workers who may be exposed to significant amounts of asbestos on a daily basis

Why do workers wear safety gear?

Because the risks of asbestos increase with length of exposure, anyone working to manage asbestos will be seen wearing full safety gear. This does not mean that the danger has increased. It is to protect them from regular exposure.

Workers will be moving between high risk and low risk areas, and will probably remain in their protective gear for convenience, not because the whole area is high-risk to them.