

# Asbestos

**Learn more:** [The Asbestos and Mesothelioma Center](http://www.asbestos.com)  
<http://www.asbestos.com>

As some veterans may already know, the United States Armed Forces holds a strong history concerning the widespread use of toxic asbestos. Those who served in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War are the veterans most at risk for previous exposure to asbestos. During these wars the Armed Forces extensively used asbestos, a then-hailed wonder product. Primarily from the 1930s through the 1970s, all divisions of the U.S. military used asbestos-containing products in buildings and all forms of transportation.

Most commonly used for insulation purposes in military housing and other buildings on military bases, asbestos was imbedded in a myriad of building products, such as floor covering and plumbing equipment. In addition, branches such as the Army and Air Force used asbestos for electric wiring insulation and in break and clutch pads on vehicles such as jeeps, tanks, and aircraft. Though every sector of the military widely used asbestos, it was the Navy that found the most uses for this heat-resistant substance aboard its vessels.

The military began to apply asbestos-containing products on naval ships in the 1930s. Over the next several decades, more than 300 products containing asbestos were used by the Navy alone, mainly in engine and boiler rooms and other areas below deck for fireproofing purposes. Veterans who worked below deck experienced heavy asbestos exposure, but no sailor was out of harm's way, as the dangerous substance was applied in mess halls, navigation rooms, and sleeping quarters. Aside from insulation, products such as valves, gaskets, cables, adhesives and others contained asbestos as well.

For roughly five decades, many sailors were quite literally showered in asbestos fibers aboard these contaminated vessels. Many veterans remember sleeping beneath asbestos-covered pipes, which resulted in the sailors having to shake fallen toxic flakes off their bunks on a daily basis. Due to its jagged chemical structure, asbestos is a very fragile mineral that readily separates into microscopic fibers. These tiny particles are easily inhaled, and adhere to the internal lining of the lungs, abdomen, and heart. Once inhaled, the body experiences extreme difficulty in expelling and breaking down the chemical. With repeated exposure, asbestos fibers eventually collect in the body and slowly wreak havoc on affected cells. Due to long latency periods, exposure to asbestos results in illness much later in life. These illnesses primarily include asbestosis (a progressive respiratory disease), lung cancer, and mesothelioma (an aggressive cancer that attacks the lining of the lungs, heart, or abdomen). Although repeated exposure to asbestos can cause a variety of deadly diseases, even a single instance of exposure has the potential to result in illness later in life.

A few revealing statistics provide a contextual perspective on the extent that veterans were exposed to asbestos. According to statistics, veterans account for more than 30 percent of those suffering with mesothelioma. Additionally, Navy veterans bear an elevated risk of developing an asbestos-related illness, as sailors and shipyard workers account for 26 percent of mesothelioma cases, 16 percent of asbestos-related lung cancer, and 13 percent of serious respiratory diseases.

It wasn't until the 1970s that the military began to phase out asbestos, and relative use of the toxic material remained until the 1980s. Unfortunately, countless Americans are under the impression that asbestos use was banned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the late '80s. This is partially true since an asbestos ban was set forth in 1989. However, in 1991 the EPA's effort to ban asbestos was overturned by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals (which resulted in only six asbestos products being banned). Today, asbestos is still being used in many industrial and consumer products, such as automotive clutch and brake linings.

To learn more about the concerns facing veterans and asbestos exposure, please visit [The Asbestos and Mesothelioma Center](#), a comprehensive online resource that aims to raise public awareness on the dangers of asbestos.

Exposure to asbestos has proven to result in a wide range of health conditions, including [mesothelioma](#), a deadly cancer that attacks the lining of the lungs, heart, or abdomen. This rare form of cancer is almost exclusively caused by [asbestos exposure](#).

Due to a long latency period, [mesothelioma symptoms](#) (shortness of breath, severe cough, chest pain) may not appear for 20 or more years. For this reason, mesothelioma is often diagnosed in later stages of development, which severely complicates treatment and chances of survival. To learn more about this elusive and often puzzling disease, please review our extensive resources, featuring information on [mesothelioma causes](#), symptoms, diagnosis, and more.

### **Non-Specificity of Mesothelioma Symptoms**

The first symptoms of mesothelioma are often similar to symptoms of other diseases that are much less serious. For example, early symptoms of [pleural mesothelioma](#) (which develops in the pleural lining of the lungs) often resemble symptoms of influenza or pneumonia. Similarly, symptoms of [pericardial mesothelioma](#) (which develops in the pericardial lining of the heart) are similar to symptoms of other cardiac conditions.

If you have a history of [asbestos exposure](#) and experience any of the following symptoms, it is best to seek immediate medical advice. Also, in the interest of early detection, those who were exposed but have not yet exhibited symptoms should undergo regular chest [x-rays](#) or pulmonary function tests to monitor any adverse effects of asbestos inhalation.

### **Symptoms - Pleural Mesothelioma**

Pleural mesothelioma is the most common form of the cancer. Approximately two-thirds of mesothelioma cases originate in the pleural lining of the lungs.

Known symptoms of pleural mesothelioma include:

- Persistent dry or raspy cough (typically non-productive, meaning there is little or no phlegm)
- Coughing up blood
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Night sweats or fever
- Unexplained weight loss of 10% or more
- Fatigue
- Persistent pain in the chest or rib area, or painful breathing
- Shortness of breath that occurs even when at rest
- The appearance of lumps under the skin on the chest

Symptoms of pleural mesothelioma occur as a result of thickening of the pleural membrane and the build-up of fluid between membrane layers. Tissue thickening and fluid build-up put pressure on the lungs, leading to reduced respiratory function.

## Peritoneal Mesothelioma Symptoms

Approximately 25% to 30% of mesothelioma originates in the lining of the abdominal cavity, known as the peritoneum. Peritoneal mesothelioma symptoms are caused by thickening of the peritoneal membrane and the resulting build-up of fluid between membrane layers. These changes in membrane composition but pressure on the abdominal region and organs, leading to the following types of symptoms:

- Night sweats or fever
- Unexplained weight loss
- Swelling or pain in the abdomen
- Anemia
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea or constipation (in general, any change in bowel habits or regularity)
- Nausea or vomiting
- The appearance of lumps under the skin on the abdomen

## Pericardial Mesothelioma Symptoms

Less than 5% of mesothelioma cases originate in the membranous lining of the heart, known as the pericardium. As the pericardium layers thicken due to growth of cancer cells, fluid builds up between membrane layers, leading to impaired cardiac function and causing the following types of symptoms:

- Heart palpitations or irregular heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing, even when resting
- Fever or night sweats

Peritoneal mesothelioma is so rare that the recognized body of symptoms is not as well-developed as with more common types of mesothelioma. It is a particularly difficult type of mesothelioma to diagnose, and because of this, patients who are diagnosed with pericardial mesothelioma tend to have a poor prognosis.

## Testicular Mesothelioma Symptoms

Testicular mesothelioma is an extremely rare form of this type of cancer. Less than one hundred cases of testicular mesothelioma have been recorded in the last sixty years. With so few cases recorded, very little is known about the symptoms of the disease. However, if diagnosed early, it is also relatively simple to treat in many cases. The only known symptom of testicular mesothelioma is the appearance of testicular lumps. These may or may not be painful.

It's important to note that testicular mesothelioma may arrive spontaneously in the testicle or may be a secondary tumor. In the latter case, the primary cancer is typically peritoneal.



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