



Asbestos and your lungs

This information describes what asbestos is and the lung conditions that are caused by exposure to it. It also includes information about what to do if you've been exposed to asbestos, and the benefits and compensation available if you have been diagnosed with an asbestos-related condition.

When materials that contain asbestos are disturbed or damaged, fibres are released into the air. Breathing in these asbestos fibres can damage your lungs. There are four main diseases associated with breathing in asbestos fibres:

- **non-malignant pleural disease** - pleural plaques and diffuse pleural thickening
- **asbestosis** - a non-malignant scarring of the lung tissue
- **asbestos-related lung cancer** - there's more information on lung cancer at blf.org.uk/lung-cancer
- **mesothelioma** - a form of cancer mainly affecting the lining of the lungs. There's more information on mesothelioma at blf.org.uk/meso

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a term for a group of naturally occurring minerals made of microscopic fibres. Before its dangers were known, asbestos was often used in buildings for insulation, flooring and roofing, and was sprayed on ceilings and walls. It's now banned in the UK. But buildings constructed before the year 2000 may still have asbestos in them. If the asbestos-containing materials inside these buildings remain intact, they pose very little risk.

It's only when these materials are damaged or disturbed that tiny asbestos fibres can be released into the air and breathed into your lungs.

The symptoms of asbestos-related disease take many years – even decades – to appear after the original exposure to asbestos, so exposure a long time ago might only be showing up as a disease today.

Top tip

The Health and Safety Executive website has lots more information about asbestos. Visit their website at www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/

Who is most at risk?

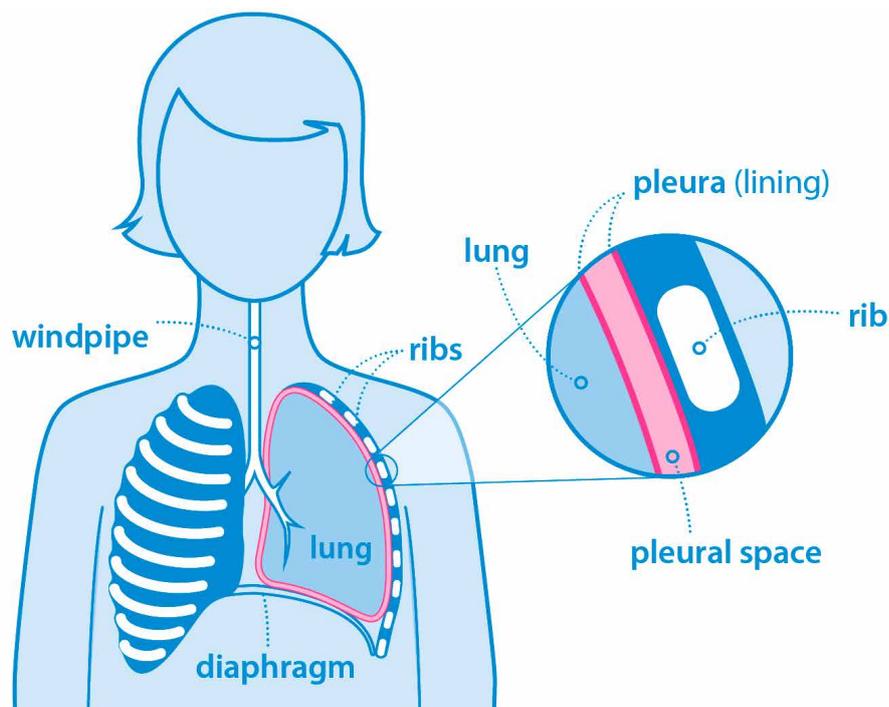
You are at higher risk of damage to your lungs if you've been exposed to asbestos for a long time at work. People at higher risk are those who've worked as:

- carpenters
- plumbers
- electricians
- asbestos miners
- painters
- builders.

If you've worked in shipbuilding, railway engineering and factories that made asbestos products, you also have a higher risk. You might also be at risk if you have lived with a worker who was exposed to asbestos.

Pleural plaques

The **pleura** is a two-layered membrane surrounding your lungs and lining the inside of your rib cage. If you have been exposed to asbestos it is very common for areas of this membrane to become thickened and to accumulate a chalky material. These areas are called **pleural plaques**.



If you have pleural plaques, it **doesn't** mean that:

- you will go on to get a more serious disease
- you have a more serious disease at the moment

Being exposed to asbestos does increase your risk of developing a serious lung condition such as asbestosis, mesothelioma or lung cancer. But there is no scientific evidence that having pleural plaques increases the risk any further. So if you've been exposed to asbestos you should not worry if you're told you have pleural plaques.

Pleural plaques aren't the same as **asbestosis** (see section on asbestosis). Furthermore, plaques aren't a form of cancer.

Symptoms

Most of the time you'll have no symptoms. You can live with pleural plaques without having any long-term problems with your health. You can live with them for years without knowing you have them.

If you do have symptoms in your chest such as breathlessness, a cough or pain, it's important not to think these are caused by the plaques and ignore them. The symptoms are more likely to be caused by another condition that might need attention.

Diagnosis

If you have been exposed to asbestos and have no chest problems, there is normally no need to have a chest X-ray or CT scan, unless your health care professional recommends it. The risk associated with exposure to X-rays or a CT-scan is far greater than the benefit of finding out you have pleural plaques. Read more about these procedures at [blf.org.uk/other-breathing-tests](https://www.blf.org.uk/other-breathing-tests).

Treatment

There is no need to treat pleural plaques in any way.

If you smoke, you should seek help to quit. This will reduce your chances of developing a smoking-related lung disease such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or lung cancer. Read more about COPD at [blf.org.uk/copd](https://www.blf.org.uk/copd) or lung cancer at [blf.org.uk/lung-cancer](https://www.blf.org.uk/lung-cancer).

Diffuse pleural thickening

Diffuse pleural thickening is where extensive, often smooth scarring, thickens the **pleural membrane** lining your lungs and chest wall. Asbestos exposure is not the only cause of diffuse pleural thickening. Other causes include infection, inflammatory disease and non-malignant **pleural effusion**, which is when there is fluid around the lungs. In all of these cases, one or both lungs could be affected.

Symptoms

When your pleura becomes thicker and hard over a large area, your lungs cannot expand as far as they used to and you may feel breathless.

Diagnosis

Your GP will refer you to a specialist for lung function tests and a CT scan. This is a special X-ray machine that takes a picture of a cross-section of your body. Occasionally it will be necessary to take a sample, or biopsy, from the thickened pleural membrane to exclude a diagnosis of mesothelioma. Read more about these procedures at [blf.org.uk/other-breathing-tests](https://www.blf.org.uk/other-breathing-tests).

Treatment

In most cases, no treatment is needed since the pleural thickening does not usually cause very severe symptoms. Avoiding smoking, keeping active and **pulmonary rehabilitation (PR)** are usually the most useful options. Read more about PR at [blf.org.uk/pr](https://www.blf.org.uk/pr)

If your breathlessness is severe, surgery can be considered. This is rare as it is not usually very effective. Read more about breathlessness at [blf.org.uk/breathlessness](https://www.blf.org.uk/breathlessness).

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a rare, long-term lung condition. It usually develops around 20-30 years after you have breathed in a considerable amount of asbestos dust in the course of your work.

Symptoms

If you breathe in asbestos fibres, they can get lodged inside your lungs and cause scarring. This scarring leads to your lungs shrinking and hardening. In turn, this results in you getting short of breath as your lungs cannot hold as much air as they used to. At first this may only happen after you've been physically active but it can eventually become a more constant problem. Other symptoms include:

- a persistent cough
- wheezing
- fatigue or extreme tiredness
- pain in your chest or shoulder
- in more advanced cases, clubbed (swollen) fingertips

Diagnosis

If you have any of the symptoms mentioned above, you should discuss this with your GP. Your GP may be able to hear a crackling sound in your lungs and may recommend a chest X-ray which, in some cases, can show the scarring of asbestosis. If it's likely you have asbestosis, your GP will refer you to a hospital specialist for further tests such as a lung function test and a CT scan of your chest. This is a special X-ray machine that takes a picture of a cross-section of your body. Read more about these procedures at [blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests).

Treatment

There is currently no cure for asbestosis once it has developed, as it's not possible to reverse the damage to your lungs. However, you can take steps to reduce your symptoms and improve your quality of life.

- One of the most important things you can do is stop smoking. Find out how to at [blf.org.uk/smoking](https://www.blf.org.uk/smoking). Symptoms are more likely to get worse if you smoke and smoking also increases the risk of lung cancer if you have asbestosis. Visit the NHS Smokefree website at www.nhs.uk/smokefree, www.helpmequit.wales if you live in Wales, www.canstopsmoking.com if you live in Scotland and www.want2stop.info if you live in Northern Ireland. Or call our helpline on **03000 030 555** for more advice on quitting smoking.
- If your breathlessness limits your activity, **pulmonary rehabilitation (PR)** might help. PR is a programme of exercise and education for people with a lung condition. Find out more at [blf.org.uk/pr](https://www.blf.org.uk/pr).
- Oxygen therapy can also help if you have low levels of oxygen in your blood. Read more about oxygen therapy at [blf.org.uk/oxygen](https://www.blf.org.uk/oxygen).

Lung cancer

Lung cancer is the growth of cancerous cells inside your lung. These cancer cells grow to form a lump called a **tumour**. There's more information on lung cancer at [blf.org.uk/lung-cancer](https://www.blf.org.uk/lung-cancer).

Most people understand that cigarette smoking increases the risk of developing lung cancer, but exposure to asbestos increases the risk too. These risks all add up, so it is even more important that you do not smoke if you have been exposed to asbestos.

Symptoms

You often won't have any symptoms of lung cancer until a tumour becomes quite large.

As your condition progresses, you'll begin to experience symptoms, such as:

- a cough
- feeling out of breath
- chest pain
- feeling tired
- appetite loss
- weight loss
- a hoarse voice
- blood in your mucus or phlegm

If you have these symptoms, you should see your doctor. Having these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you have lung cancer – they're common and have many different causes. People with long-term lung disease might already have many of them. But it's very important to tell your doctor if your usual symptoms change or become worse.

Diagnosis

Your GP will refer you to a specialist who might suggest:

- **CT scan** – a special X-ray machine that takes a picture of a cross-section of your body
- **biopsy** – this is when a sample of tissue is taken from the tumour
- **bronchoscopy** – a small, flexible telescope is passed into your lungs through your nose and windpipe to allow your doctor to take a closer look at the tumour
- an **endobronchial ultrasound (EBUS)**: this is similar to a bronchoscopy. It uses a thin, flexible tube, which has an ultrasound scanner in the tip. This is passed into the windpipe through the mouth. It allows the doctor to scan and take tissue samples of lymph nodes in your chest
- **PET scan** – a painless procedure where you are injected with a slightly radioactive substance, which can be detected by the scanner and show if the cancer has spread to other areas of your body

Read more about these procedures at [blf.org.uk/other-breathing-tests](https://www.blf.org.uk/other-breathing-tests).

Treatment

There are a number of treatments for lung cancer and often patients receive more than one type:

- **surgery** – there are several different types of surgery. You might have a section of your lung removed, or the surgeon might need to remove a whole lung
- **chemotherapy** – medications that attack the cancer cells are delivered straight into your bloodstream through a drip, or through injections and tablets
- **radiotherapy** – this treatment uses high-energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells
- **targeted therapy** – medicines that stop the genetic mutations that can cause some types of lung cancer. This treatment is currently only suitable for people with advanced cancer
- **palliative care** – these treatments are available to help you control your symptoms and feel as well as possible

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that begins to grow in your **pleural membrane** around your lungs. Less commonly, mesothelioma can affect a similar lining around your abdomen or heart. There's more information on mesothelioma at blf.org.uk/meso.

Symptoms

The symptoms of mesothelioma only show up many years, usually several decades, after being exposed to asbestos. The condition is slow to appear and then quick to progress. Some of the main symptoms are:

- feeling out of breath
- coughing
- pain in your chest or shoulder

As mesothelioma develops, it often causes fluid to build up in your chest. This is known as a **pleural effusion**. It takes up some of the space inside your chest and squashes the affected lung, restricting its ability to expand as you breathe and causing you to feel out of breath.

Diagnosis

Your GP will refer you to a specialist who might suggest:

- **CT scan** – a special X-ray machine that takes a picture of a cross-section of your body
- **pleural aspiration** – this is when a sample of the fluid in your pleural space is taken
- **percutaneous biopsy** – a thin needle is inserted into your lung lining to take a sample of tissue
- **thoracoscopy** – an instrument called a **thoracoscope** is used to look inside your pleural space so a sample of fluid or tissue can be taken. Sometimes, sterile talc might also be inserted to prevent fluid building up again. This is becoming the test that doctors prefer to use for the best results if you have a pleural effusion, which is when there is fluid around the lungs

Our helpline

Our friendly helpline team are always willing to answer your questions and provide support. Call them on **03000 030 555**. Lines are open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Treatment

There are four main types of treatment for mesothelioma:

- **chemotherapy** – medications that attack the cancer cells are delivered straight into your bloodstream through a drip, or through injections and tablets
- **surgery** – this is only recommended as part of a clinical trial. There is a lot of medical debate about surgery to treat mesothelioma and whether or not it offers benefits. But some types of surgery may be recommended depending on the type of mesothelioma you have
- **radiotherapy** – this treatment uses high-energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells but is only recommended for pain control
- **palliative care** – these treatments are available to help you control your symptoms and feel as well as possible

If you think you might have been exposed to asbestos

If you think you have might have been exposed to asbestos in the past and have some of the symptoms listed above, it is important that your GP knows. However, it is not a reason to panic. Most people do not develop serious or life-threatening lung disease as a result of exposure to asbestos. You should always seek medical advice if you have symptoms like coughing, feeling short of breath or chest pain.

Talk to your GP about:

- any past or present jobs with an asbestos risk
- living with someone who has worked in a job with an asbestos risk
- DIY or other situations where you might have been exposed to asbestos
- ensuring your exposure to asbestos is documented in your medical records
- your symptoms and how to relieve them
- tests you might need
- whether you should see a specialist

DIY home improvements and asbestos

If you are doing DIY work on your home and think you have found asbestos you should seek advice from an environmental health officer at your local council. They will be able to tell you who to contact to remove the asbestos or what steps you need to take to protect yourself.

If you live in England or Wales you can find out more about asbestos removal at www.gov.uk/asbestos-in-home.

If you live in Northern Ireland visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/asbestos-removal.

Benefits and compensation

If you are diagnosed with an asbestos-related disease, you may be eligible for compensation or financial assistance. Depending on your circumstances, this can happen through the courts, the benefits system or government compensation schemes.

You may wish to pursue a civil claim against previous employers, where exposure to asbestos may have occurred during that employment. Mesothelioma UK has advice on making a claim, what questions to ask and a list of solicitors on its website www.mesothelioma.uk.com.

Alternatively, you can contact the Mesothelioma UK's freephone helpline on **0800 169 2409** for advice. Their website also contains details of specialist mesothelioma nurses that work in some areas of the country.

People across the UK who have asbestos-related conditions can apply for industrial injuries benefits if they have one of the conditions known as a 'prescribed disease'. These are:

- asbestosis
- mesothelioma
- lung cancer with asbestosis
- lung cancer without asbestosis if there has been extensive occupational exposure to asbestos in specified occupations
- diffuse pleural thickening

There are also government compensation schemes under the Pneumoconiosis etc (Worker's Compensation) Act 1979 and the Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme. Learn more about the different forms of compensation at **www.gov.uk**.

In Wales, the Asbestos Awareness and Support Cymru gives support to people with asbestos-related disease. For more information visit their website at **www.a-a-s-c.org.uk** or call their helpline on **01495 272479**.

People with **pleural plaques** in Scotland and Northern Ireland may be able to claim compensation and should take legal advice about taking this action. However, this is not the case for people in England and Wales.

In Scotland, Clydeside Action on Asbestos campaigns for people with asbestos-related disease. They can also advise you on welfare rights and help to find you a specialist solicitor. Visit their website at **www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk** or call them on **0141 552 8852** or by freephone on **0800 089 1717**.

Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum at **www.asbestosforum.org.uk** is another useful place to look for benefits advice and support.

It is a good idea to seek advice quickly so that you claim correctly and receive what you are entitled to. Our welfare benefits advisers are a good place to start. Call the helpline on **03000 030 555** and we can tell you about the various financial support and compensation options that might be available to you and your family, including state benefits, and guide you to other sources of help and support.

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: 03000 030 555

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Ringing our helpline never costs more than a local call and is usually free, even from a mobile.

helpline@blf.org.uk

blf.org.uk

British Lung Foundation
73-75 Goswell Road
London EC1V 7ER

Registered charity in England and Wales (326730), Scotland (038415) and the Isle of Man (1177)



Code: IS34

Version: 3

Last medically reviewed: January 2018

Due for medical review: January 2021

We value feedback on our information. To let us know your views, and for the most up to date version of this information and references, call the helpline or visit **blf.org.uk**