



Asbestos Exposure & Construction Workers Fact Sheet

Workers in nearly every construction trade face an elevated risk for asbestos-related cancers and lung disease.

Most construction workers are aware of everyday work hazards like falls and electrocution, but many ignore the dangers of exposure to asbestos. Asbestos-contaminated materials place approximately 1.3 million construction and general industry employees at high risk for lung disease and cancer.

Asbestos is a natural, heat- and flame-resistant mineral that was once added to thousands of construction and manufacturing products. While companies have now phased out most every product that contains asbestos, asbestos building materials still exist at countless jobsites — especially homes and commercial buildings built before the 1970s.

Why Is Asbestos Dangerous?

Scientists have confirmed that breathing airborne asbestos can trigger a variety of serious and fatal lung illnesses, including mesothelioma, lung cancer, pleural plaques and asbestosis. In many cases, symptoms don't appear until decades after the first exposure.

1.3 million U.S. construction and general industry workers face serious health risks, including death, from exposure to asbestos.

55 countries have banned the use of asbestos in construction. Its use is restricted in the United States, but legal.

2,000 – 3,000 new cases of pleural mesothelioma are diagnosed in the United States each year.

80 percent or more of all mesothelioma cases result from exposure to asbestos.

25 – 50 years is the average gap between a patient's first exposure to asbestos and the appearance of mesothelioma symptoms.

10,000 Americans die from asbestos-related conditions each year.

50 percent of all deaths from work-related cancers in the United States are caused by asbestos.

2 – 10 percent of people with heavy, prolonged exposure to asbestos usually develop pleural mesothelioma.

\$2.4 billion was the direct economic cost of asbestos-related cancers in 2008.

\$802 million was the total value of international asbestos trade in 2008.

Who Is at Risk?

Asbestos is a serious risk for construction workers of any trade. Demolition workers who unsafely dispose of asbestos experience some of the highest risks. Roofers, electricians, drywall workers, painters, plumbers and laborers all face regular exposures, but anyone working on an older structure should be cautious of asbestos.

Airborne asbestos dust can spread around jobsites easily and expose any workers nearby. Even worse, workers can bring the dust home on their clothes, hair or tools, placing family members at risk for secondary exposures that can be just as deadly. Even short-term exposures can be harmful.

How Does Asbestos Exposure Happen?

Not every asbestos-containing material is dangerous. In fact, most products are safe when in good condition and left alone. But when asbestos materials start to rot, or a worker disturbs them by cutting, scraping, drilling or sanding, toxic fibers up to 1,200 times thinner than a human hair are released into the air. The smallest fibers can float for a long time, and may cause significant health problems for anyone who inhales or swallows them.

Where Can Asbestos Be Found?

Thousands of [commercial construction materials](#) once contained asbestos. Some estimates place the number as high as 4,000. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) states that asbestos products are present in the vast majority of the nation's 733,000 public and commercial buildings.

The asbestos products in these buildings can range from roof shingles to [floor tiles](#), and many materials in between.

The Following Products May Contain Asbestos:

- ✓ Drywall and related products
- ✓ Insulation products
- ✓ Vermiculite products
- ✓ Pipes and duct tape
- ✓ Joint packing
- ✓ Construction felts
- ✓ Siding panels
- ✓ Insulating cements
- ✓ Textured paints

You may be able to identify an asbestos product based on the name of its manufacturer or brand. Be cautious around materials from the following companies, especially if the product is old or in poor condition.

Former Asbestos Manufacturers Include:

- ✓ W.R. Grace
- ✓ Owens Corning
- ✓ Celotex
- ✓ CAFCO
- ✓ Delaware Insulation
- ✓ Brunswick Fabrications
- ✓ The Flintkote Company
- ✓ Hanson Permanente
- ✓ Babcock & Wilcox
- ✓ Fuller-Austin Insulation
- ✓ C.E. Thurston & Sons
- ✓ Kentile Floors
- ✓ California Portland Cement

Report Asbestos Exposure

If you need to report asbestos exposure or an unsafe work environment, you can file an anonymous report with the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA). You can fill out an [online complaint form](#), **call (800) 321-6742** or contact your [regional office](#).

Sources

- [OSHA. \(2002\). Asbestos Standard for the Construction Industry.](#)
- [Ivanov, I. \(n.d.\). Elimination of Asbestos-related Diseases](#)
- [California Department of Consumer Affairs. \(2013\). A Consumer's Guide to Asbestos](#)