

ASBESTOS - WHAT IS IT?

Asbestos is a generic term for a group of minerals known for their strength, flame and heat resistance, and seemingly indestructible qualities. Once considered a "miracle mineral," asbestos was used for many years in building construction. It can be found in many forms and places. Asbestos was used in boiler and pipe insulation, plasters, floor tile, and as a fireproofing material on structural components in buildings. It has also been sprayed on ceilings and walls as acoustic insulation. It was even used in gloves, aprons, and oven mitts for the home.

Because of its indestructible qualities, asbestos is considered an inhalation hazard, and only impacts the lungs. The body cannot digest, break down, or change asbestos; it can only attempt to encapsulate it with scar tissue. So when a fiber gets into the aveoli sacs in the lungs (The alveoli are the final branchings of the respiratory tree and act as the primary gas exchange units of the lung)it can't get out and creates scar tissue that diminishes the ability of the aveoli to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide in and out of the bloodstream. Smokers have a much higher rate of getting an asbestos related disease due to the damage smoking causes to the respiratory system which allows a higher percent of fibers to enter the lungs and stay there.

Several types of asbestos were banned by the EPA in the mid-70's due to concern over the health effects associated with exposure to such materials. It is important to remember that asbestos generally has been found to be hazardous to humans only when it is inhaled into the lungs, thus considered an" inhalation hazard". Asbestos is only a potential health problem if it is disturbed and fibers are released and gets into the lungs. You cannot get an exposure through skin absorption or ingestion.

Asbestos occurs naturally as a fiber; individual fibers are so small they are invisible to the naked eye. Asbestos is not hazardous in its original, undisturbed state; only when it is disturbed does it release asbestos fibers. The California state rock is serpentine which is one of the minerals asbestos is found. Asbestos fibers have been sampled in air off the California coast and in soils around California due to erosion of naturally occurring serpentine rock.

Symptoms of asbestos-related diseases do not occur right after exposure. Generally it takes 10 to 40 years for any symptoms from an exposure to appear. Controlling exposures now will prevent asbestos related diseases decades later. Just because you are exposed, does not mean you will get an asbestos related disease. Not every exposure results in an asbestos related disease.

• WHERE IS ASBESTOS FOUND?

Asbestos may be found in many different products and many different places. Some examples of building materials that might contain asbestos are:

1. Sprayed on fire-proofing and acoustical ceilings in buildings
2. Insulation for pipes, boilers and heating systems in buildings and homes
3. Floor Tiles and Mastic (glue underneath)
4. Putties, caulks, and glues.
5. Roofing Materials
6. Joint compound in older buildings and homes
7. Brake linings and clutch pads in older vehicles
8. Lab Counter Tops
9. Sink Undercoating