Living
with Asbestos-Related Illness

A Self-Care Guide

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CDC
ATSDR
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY

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About this Guide

This guide will help you understand the illnesses asbestos may cause and how to take care of yourself if you have any of those conditions. Caregivers may also find the guide useful.

Asbestos Exposure and Health

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral. It is made up of fibers that are so small that you cannot see them. Asbestos fibers may be released into the air when asbestos-containing material is disturbed during product use, demolition work, and building or home maintenance, repair, or remodeling. If asbestos fibers are in the air you breathe, you will get asbestos fibers in your lungs. This is the main way that people are exposed to asbestos. Asbestos fibers may remain in the lungs for a lifetime. In some cases, the fibers might damage the lungs or the pleura covering the lungs, leading to illness and even death.

Some people who worked with asbestos years ago are now getting sick. They may have brought asbestos fibers home on their clothes, shoes, and bodies. People who lived in those same households could have been exposed to asbestos, too. Some household members may now be sick because of this exposure.

First Steps

If you think you might have been exposed to asbestos:

- **Tell your doctor.** Your doctor may take an exposure history and recommend a thorough physical exam, including a chest x-ray and lung function tests. Your doctor may need a specialist who is experienced in reading x-rays for asbestos-related illness to help interpret the results. Other tests may be necessary.
- **Quit smoking.** If you are a smoker, quit smoking. Smoking combined with asbestos exposure greatly increases the risk of getting lung cancer.
- **Get regular influenza (flu) and pneumonia shots.** Regular shots help reduce the chance of lung infections.

Being exposed to asbestos does not mean that you will develop health problems! Many things need to be considered when evaluating whether you are at risk for health problems from asbestos exposure. A doctor can help you find out if you have health problems from asbestos exposure.

- **Abdominal/diaphragm breathing:** Abdominal breathing also slows down your breathing and helps relax your entire body.
  - Lie on your back in a comfortable position with a pillow under your head and knees.
  - Rest one hand on your abdomen just below your rib cage. Rest the other hand your chest.
  - Slowly breathe in and out through your nose using your abdominal muscles. The hand resting on your abdomen will rise when you breathe in and fall when you breathe out. The hand on your chest should be almost still. Repeat three or four times before resting.
- **Active Cycle of Breathing Technique (ACBT):** ACBT is a series of breathing techniques that help clear secretions and improve air delivery to your lungs. ACBT can be done sitting up. This technique combines breathing exercises with the "huff" cough and has three components in a set cycle. The huff cough involves holding a deep breath for a few seconds and then exhaling forcefully. The cycle is repeated until the huff becomes dry or nonproductive, or when 20 minutes have passed. Ask your doctor for guidance and instructions on this therapy.

Pulmonary Rehabilitation

- Talk to your doctor about taking part in a pulmonary rehabilitation program. Pulmonary rehabilitation uses different therapies for persons with pulmonary disease. The goal of pulmonary rehabilitation is to help patients reach and maintain their maximum level of independence and ability to function in the community.
- Pulmonary rehabilitation is becoming a crucial part of therapy for many patients. It offers the best treatment option for patients with chronic respiratory illnesses. It helps people increase their exercise capacity and endurance and improves their health-related quality of life. The treatment also helps people breathe easier and results in fewer hospital admissions, even among patients with the most severe degree of lung disease.
- Patients with advanced lung disease may have emotional disorders, mainly depression and anxiety. In addition to appropriate medical therapy for these disorders, exercise as part of a pulmonary rehabilitation program can help lessen these feelings.
- The goals of a pulmonary rehabilitation program are to:
  - make breathing easier
  - improve pulmonary function
  - ease shortness of breath
  - increase efficiency of energy use
  - correct nutrition deficiencies