



Asbestos-related conditions

In this information, we explain what asbestos is and the different lung conditions that can be caused by asbestos exposure. This information is for people who have been diagnosed with an asbestos-related lung condition and want to know more about it. We also explain what you should do if you think you've been exposed to asbestos. There's also information about the benefits and compensation you might be entitled to if you've been diagnosed with an asbestos-related lung condition. Still got questions? Chat to our helpline on 03000 030 555.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibre that was widely used in construction and other industries until the late 1990s. The three types of asbestos fibres most commonly used in the UK are:

- blue (crocidolite),
- brown (amosite) and
- white (chrysotile)

Where is asbestos found?

Before its dangers were known, asbestos was often used in buildings for insulation, flooring, roofing, and was sprayed on ceilings and walls. Its use is now banned in the UK, but buildings constructed before the year 2000 may still have asbestos in them.

How do you get an asbestos-related lung condition?

If asbestos inside buildings remains intact, it poses very little risk. It's only when it's damaged or disturbed that tiny asbestos fibres can be released into the air and enter your lungs when breathing. Breathing in asbestos fibres can damage your lungs and their lining.

The symptoms of asbestos-related conditions take many years – even decades – to appear after the original exposure to asbestos. This means that exposure a long time ago might only show up as a condition today. Some asbestos-related conditions (such as pleural plaques) may never cause symptoms.

Who is most at risk of an asbestos-related condition?

If you worked in an industry such as building or construction, particularly from the 1970s to 1990s, you may have been exposed to asbestos. This includes ship-building, construction and insulation work, but asbestos exposure could have occurred in other jobs.

Nowadays, you're only likely to come into contact with asbestos if it is disturbed or damaged in old buildings.

You might also be at risk if you have lived with a worker who was exposed to asbestos. They may have carried asbestos fibres home on their clothing, where family members could breathe them in.

The Health and Safety Executive website (www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos) has more information about asbestos, including information on if you're at risk of exposure to asbestos.

Asbestos-related conditions

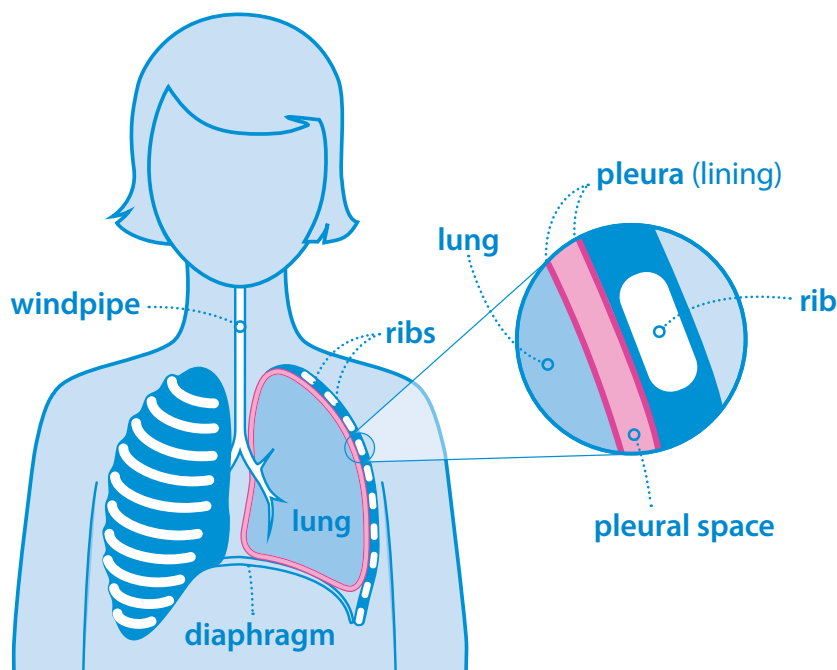
There are four main lung conditions associated with breathing in asbestos fibres:

- **Non-malignant (not cancerous) pleural disease** - pleural plaques, diffuse (widespread) pleural thickening and non-malignant (not cancerous) pleural effusion (which is a collection of fluid around the lungs).
- **Asbestosis** - a non-malignant (not cancerous) scarring of the lungs
- **Asbestos-related lung cancer** - blf.org.uk/lung-cancer
- **Mesothelioma** - blf.org.uk/meso

Pleural plaques

Inside your chest there are two thin layers of cells - called the **pleura** or **pleural membrane**. Each layer is about as thin as the skin of a balloon. The inner layer covers your lungs and the outer layer lines the inside of your rib cage. If you have been exposed to asbestos, it's common for areas of the pleura to become thickened. These areas are called **pleural plaques**.

It's thought that around 36,000 to 90,000 people per year develop pleural plaques in the UK. Pleural plaques are considered harmless and many people in the UK have them, often without even knowing about it.



If you have pleural plaques, it **doesn't** mean that you will go on to get a more serious disease.

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 and they aren't a form of cancer.

Symptoms of pleural plaques

Pleural plaques don't cause any symptoms (they are asymptomatic). You can live with pleural plaques without having any long-term problems with your health. You may not even know you have them.

It's understandable to be concerned if you are told you have pleural plaques, as this is a sign you've been exposed to asbestos in the past. But it's important to remember pleural plaques are benign (non-cancerous).

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

Diagnosing pleural plaques

If you have been exposed to asbestos and have no chest problems, there is normally no need to have a chest X-ray ([blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests/imaging-scans#x-ray](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests/imaging-scans#x-ray)) or CT scan ([blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests/imaging-scans#ct-scan](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests/imaging-scans#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 if you have pleural plaques.

Diagnosing pleural plaques normally happens when a person is treated for something else, and a chest X-ray or CT scan shows them to be present.

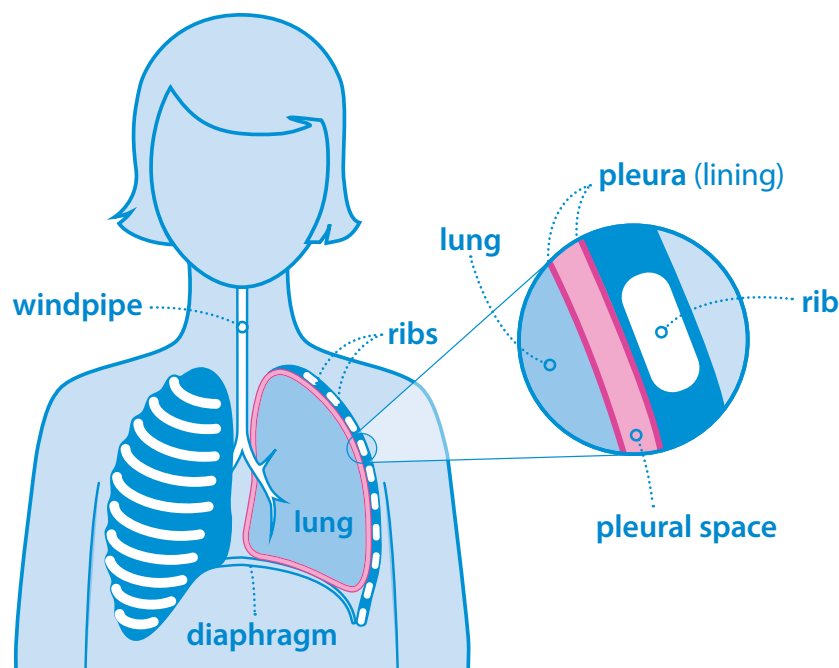
Treating pleural plaques

There is no need to treat pleural plaques and they cannot be removed.

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) ([blf.org.uk/copd](https://www.blf.org.uk/copd)) or lung cancer ([blf.org.uk/lung-cancer](https://www.blf.org.uk/lung-cancer)).

Diffuse pleural thickening

Inside your chest there are two thin layers of cells - called the **pleura** or **pleural membrane**. Each layer is about as thin as the skin of a balloon. The inner layer covers your lungs and the outer layer lines the inside of your rib cage.



Diffuse (or widespread) pleural thickening is where extensive, often smooth scarring, thickens large parts of 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 conditions and non-malignant (not cancerous) **pleural effusion**, which is when there is fluid around the lungs. In all of these cases, one or both lungs could be affected.

Symptoms of diffuse pleural thickening

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**.

Diagnosing diffuse pleural thickening

Your GP may refer you to a specialist for consideration of further tests such as lung function tests (**blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathing-tests**) and a CT scan. A CT scan 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 (**blf.org.uk/meso**).

Treating diffuse pleural thickening

In most cases, no treatment is needed since the pleural thickening does not usually cause very severe symptoms. Stopping smoking (**blf.org.uk/smoking**), keeping active (**blf.org.uk/keep-active**) and pulmonary rehabilitation (PR) (**blf.org.uk/pr**) are usually the most helpful options. If your breathlessness (**blf.org.uk/breathlessness**) is severe, surgery can very occasionally be considered. This is rare, as it is not usually very effective and is a major operation.

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 of asbestosis

If you breathe in asbestos fibres, they can get lodged inside your lungs. This can cause scarring and thickening around your air sacs, meaning it's more difficult for oxygen to reach the blood stream. This scarring leads to your lungs 'shrinking' and 'hardening'. In turn, this results in you becoming 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:

- shortness of breath
- persistent cough
- wheeze
- fatigue or extreme tiredness
- pain in your chest or shoulder
- in more advanced cases, clubbed (swollen) fingertips.

Diagnosing asbestosis

If you have any of the symptoms mentioned above and you have been exposed to asbestos, 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. A CT scan is a special X-ray machine that takes a picture of a cross-section of your body.

Treating asbestosis

Unfortunately, there is currently no cure for asbestosis and 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.

If your breathlessness limits your activity, pulmonary rehabilitation (PR) might help. PR is a programme of exercise and education for people with different types of lung conditions. Oxygen therapy (blf.org.uk/oxygen) can also help if you have low levels of oxygen in your bloodstream.

If you smoke, the most important thing you can do is stop smoking. Symptoms of asbestosis are more likely to get worse if you smoke. Smoking also increases the risk of lung cancer if you have asbestosis. Go to the websites below for advice and support to stop smoking in:

- England - www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking
- Wales - www.helpmequit.wales
- Northern Ireland - www.stopsmokingni.info
- Scotland - www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/stopping-smoking

Lung cancer and mesothelioma

Lung cancer

Lung cancer is the growth of cancerous cells inside your lung. These cancer cells grow to form a lump called a tumour. Read more detailed information about lung cancer at 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.

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that begins to grow in the pleural membrane around your lungs. Less commonly, mesothelioma can affect a similar lining around your abdomen or heart.

Symptoms of mesothelioma only develop 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
- persistent pain in your chest or shoulder
- weight loss.

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.

Read more detailed information about mesothelioma at blf.org.uk/meso

What to do if you think you've been exposed to asbestos

When should I see my GP?

If you think you have might have been exposed to asbestos in the past and have symptoms of an asbestos-related condition, it's important your GP knows. However, it is not a reason to worry. Most people do not develop serious or life-threatening lung disease as a result of exposure to asbestos. However, 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 (you may have inhaled asbestos fibres that they brought back home)
- 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.

What to do if you think you've found asbestos in your home

If you're 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 on the gov.uk website at www.gov.uk/asbestos-in-home
- If you live in Northern Ireland, you can read about asbestos removal on the NI direct website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/asbestos-removal
- If you live in Scotland, you can get advice on asbestos in the home from Scotland Shelter at scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/repairs_and_bad_conditions/home_safety/asbestos_in_the_home

I think I've inhaled asbestos – what should I do?

If you think you've been exposed to asbestos, it's understandable to be concerned about the effects it might have on your health. But in most cases, the risk to your health from short term exposure to asbestos is very low.

Developing an asbestos-related condition is much more likely to happen if you have breathed in a considerable amount of asbestos fibres over a prolonged time.

But if you're concerned, you should ask your GP to make a note in your personal record about possible exposure, including dates, duration, and if you know them, the type of asbestos and likely exposure levels. If you have asbestos-related symptoms, they might request a chest X-ray.

Benefits and compensation

Depending on your circumstances, compensation can happen through the courts, the benefits system or government compensation schemes. It's a good idea to seek advice quickly so you claim correctly and receive what you're entitled to. Call our helpline on **03000 030 555** and we can give you general advice about the various financial support and compensation options that might be available to you, including state benefits. We can also guide you to other sources of help and support.

Industrial injury benefits and government compensation schemes

People across the UK who have asbestos-related conditions can apply for industrial injuries benefits (www.gov.uk/industrial-injuries-disablement-benefit) 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 (www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk/compensation-and-benefits/pneumoconiosis-etc-workers-compensation-act-1979) and the Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (www.gov.uk/diffuse-mesothelioma-payment). You can read more about the different forms of compensation on the government website (www.gov.uk).

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.

You can read more about the benefits you might be entitled to if you live with a long-term lung condition in our welfare benefits information at blf.org.uk/welfare-benefits

Making a claim against previous employers

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 and what questions to ask a solicitor to check they specialise in this area and have a good track record (www.mesothelioma.uk.com/information/compensation-legal-advice). The Association of Personal Injury Lawyers lists specialist solicitors (www.apil.org.uk/accredited-injury-lawyers/asbestos-disease-specialists). In Scotland, get in touch with Action on Asbestos (www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk).

You can get proof of employment history to support your claim from the gov.uk website (www.gov.uk/get-proof-employment-history).

Further support and advice

Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum is a useful place to look for benefits advice and support (asbestosforum.org.uk)

In Scotland, 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. Go to their website (www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk) or call them on **0141 552 8852** or by freephone on **0800 089 1717**.

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

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: **03000 030 555**

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Ringing our helpline will cost the same as a local call.

helpline@blf.org.uk

blf.org.uk

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blf.org.uk/asbestos

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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