

INFORMATION SHEET 1

# HEALTH RISKS FROM ASBESTOS EXPOSURE

**Inhaling asbestos fibres can result in asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.**

## WHAT ARE THE HEALTH RISKS FROM ASBESTOS?

The health risks from asbestos occur when people breathe in airborne asbestos fibres. Once inhaled, they can become embedded in the lungs and may cause diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

## WHY IS ASBESTOS A HEALTH RISK?

Asbestos is a health risk when it is breathed in as fine fibres. The risk to health may increase with the number of fibres inhaled and with frequency of exposure. When asbestos fibre is breathed in, larger fibres tend to be cleared by the lungs and upper respiratory tract. The finer fibres are more difficult to remove and may settle in the lungs. This makes asbestos a construction site hazard that by itself cannot always be seen.

When comparing the size of asbestos fibres with human hair, the diameter of a hair is approximately 400–1200 times larger than either blue or brown asbestos fibres.

## Health risks from breathing in asbestos fibres increase when:

- > more fibres are inhaled
- > exposure occurs more frequently
- > exposure occurs over a long period of time.

## WHO IS AT RISK FROM ASBESTOS?

Generally speaking, the risk is low for low-level short-term exposure for occupants in older homes. People are more likely to experience asbestos-related diseases when they are exposed to higher concentrations of asbestos, are exposed frequently and over long periods of time.

Asbestos-related diseases generally occur in workers exposed to high dose rates over extended periods of time. Demolition and construction workers in the Canterbury region are at a high-risk of exposure to asbestos because of the amount of building demolition and repair required following the 2010–2011 earthquakes.

Workers should:

- > be aware of asbestos hazards
- > know how to manage the risk to themselves and others.

## HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR AN ASBESTOS-RELATED DISEASE TO DEVELOP?

Asbestos-related diseases are long-latency diseases – that is, it may take 20 years or more before symptoms appear. By this time it is too late to prevent the disease from occurring.

## IS ANY EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS SAFE?

IARC (International Agency for Research on Cancer) has classified all forms of asbestos as being carcinogenic to people (classification – Group 1\*).

**WORKERS SHOULD AIM TO HAVE NO EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS.**

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\* From IARC website at: <http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/index.php>  
(site last updated: 30 October 2013)

## WHAT DISEASES ARE CAUSED BY ASBESTOS?

There are four main diseases caused by asbestos:

Disease	Symptom	Effects of the disease
<b>Pleural plaques</b>	Scar tissue on the outer lining of the lungs, internal chest wall and diaphragm	May or may not affect the ability to breathe  Not everyone exposed to asbestos develops pleural plaques
<b>Asbestosis</b>	Inflammation in the lungs resulting in the formation of scar tissue (fibrosis)	Shortness of breath, coughing  Lung damage is permanent  Condition can continue to get worse even when the person is no longer exposed to asbestos
<b>Lung cancer</b>	Cancerous tumours occurring mainly in the lungs	The risk of developing lung cancer from asbestos exposure is increased when people smoke
<b>Mesothelioma</b>	Cancer of the lining of the lungs (may also occur in other parts of the body)	Approximately 90% of people who have mesothelioma have had high exposure to asbestos  Mesothelioma may take more than 20 years to develop  Death usually occurs between 9 months and 3 years after symptoms occur

PUBLISHED: JULY 2014. CURRENT UNTIL 2017. VERSION 2

