

Asbestos is not just dangerous –it’s deadly!

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Asbestos is a natural, fibrous mineral which is mined and processed. The main type of asbestos is chrysotile (white asbestos) which accounts for 99% of present world production. It is the type mined in Canada, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Brazil and Zimbabwe.

Asbestos has been used in cement to make water pipes and roofing materials, largely due to its insulation and fire retardant qualities. It was used as a spray-on insulation material for ceilings and beams, and put on pipe lagging and around boilers. It is still found in many buildings as insulation and in vinyl floor tiles and in ceiling tiles, although it is slowly being removed due to safety concerns. There used to be some 3,000 products manufactured in North America from asbestos.

Asbestos was first mined in Canada in 1879 and is still being mined here. Today, 95% of Canadian asbestos is exported to countries in the developing world where it is mostly used to make asbestos cement pipes and roofing tiles.¹

In Canada

- The Canadian Cancer Society has called on the federal government to ban the use and export of asbestos. <http://bit.ly/aTIJM9>
- Canada is well behind other countries in protecting its citizens from asbestos exposure –more than 40 countries have banned the use of any form of asbestos.
- Statistics Canada reported that 461 new cases of mesothelioma were recorded in 2006, an increase of 67% over a decade and a half.²
- Exposure to asbestos is the single largest cause of worker death across the country.
- It has been estimated that over 60% of workers who die from an occupational disease, die from asbestos exposure. For Quebec, this figure is 84%.²
- Federal government regulations permit workers under federal jurisdiction to be exposed to asbestos at a level 10 times the level permitted in all other Western countries.²

Around the world

- Canada has been condemned on the international stage for its export of deadly asbestos.
- The World Health Organization has labeled asbestos a public health hazard and considers it carcinogenic.³
- Canada exports 175,000 tonnes of asbestos to developing countries –particularly India, Bangladesh and Indonesia.³
- Globally, approximately 90,000 people die each year from asbestos related diseases.
- In India, at least 100,000 workers inhale asbestos every day.
- One third of the asbestos in India comes from Canada.⁴

¹ CAW Health & Safety factsheet on asbestos: <http://www.caw.ca/en/4650.htm>

² Joint letter from the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and the Rideau Institute to federal Health Minister Alglukkaq, dated December 1, 2009

³ Montreal Gazette, *It is deeply immoral for Quebec to sell asbestos*, February 4, 2010
<http://www.montrealgazette.com/health/deeply+immoral+Quebec+sell+asbestos/2519887/story.html>

⁴ Ottawa Citizen, Canada exporting ‘misery’ of asbestos: Indian MD, December 15, 2007
<http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=e84067b8-1429-40a3-b55f-0d0aca4da358>

- Countries where asbestos is banned include: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Brunei, Bulgaria, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Gabon, Germany, Greece, Honduras, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Kuwait, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, New Caledonia, Norway, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, United Kingdom, Uruguay

Asbestos related diseases

Asbestos enters the body through breathing in the tiny asbestos fibres. They can also be ingested by food or drink. Asbestos exposure causes a number of deadly diseases.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a chronic lung disease caused by the inhalation of asbestos. Scar tissue forms in the lungs around the asbestos fibres, making the lungs tough and inelastic. Breathing becomes difficult, insufficient oxygen reaches the blood and the heart becomes enlarged and weakened. Death will result if the condition is allowed to continue unchecked.¹

Cancer

There are a number of cancers caused by asbestos exposure. These include lung, trachea, laryngeal, gastro-intestinal (esophagus, stomach, colon and rectum) cancers and mesothelioma.

Studies have found that excess cancer rates can occur among workers exposed to relatively low levels of asbestos (that is, within present allowable limits according to government regulations) for long periods of time or exposed to high levels for relatively brief periods of time (even a few weeks of high exposure are enough).¹

Lung Cancer

Asbestos-related lung cancer can occur from occupational or environmental exposure; it is virtually incurable. The chances of recovery for those whose lung cancer is caused by asbestos are worse because the lungs may already be damaged by the dust. The latency period for lung cancer associated with asbestos exposure is usually between 15 and 35 years.¹ Lung cancer is found among asbestos workers in even great numbers than the incidence of mesothelioma –approximately two to one.²

Lung cancer may result from relatively low-dose exposure and a review of eight studies showed that there is no evidence of a threshold below which excess disease does not appear. Less than one month of work in one factory was sufficient to significantly increase the risk of death 15 to 20 years later.¹

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a formerly rare, but increasingly common cancer of the lining around the lung which is always caused by asbestos. Malignant mesothelioma can be contracted from very low exposures to asbestos and accounts for the majority of victims who contract an asbestos-related disease through environmental exposure in the community or in the home from being exposed to a family member's clothing. The latency period for mesothelioma is generally between 30 to 50 years but it can be less. On average, mesothelioma patients survive 18 months to two years following diagnosis.¹
