



# WHAT IS MESOTHELIOMA?



**MESOTHELIOMA UK**

**Supporting People With This Asbestos Cancer**

## What is Mesothelioma?

Mesothelioma is a form of cancer that affects the mesothelium. The mesothelium is a thin membrane that lines the inner surface of:

- the chest wall, where it is known as the pleura,
- the abdomen, where it is known as the peritoneum,
- the heart, where it is known as the pericardium, and
- the testicles.

The mesothelium also surrounds the organs found within these cavities for example the heart, lung and intestines.

Mesothelioma can cause shortness of breath, pain, loss of appetite and weight loss. It can also cause fatigue and lethargy.

Mesothelioma affecting the lungs is the most common form of the disease.

In the United Kingdom approximately 2,700 people a year are diagnosed with mesothelioma and this number is steadily increasing.

## What causes mesothelioma?

Exposure to asbestos is the only known cause of mesothelioma. Usually the exposure has occurred several decades previously and sometimes the exposure can be quite casual.

The disease has been described in medical literature since 1870 although the first suspicion linking asbestos and mesothelioma did not appear in the UK until 1935 and a definite link was not reported until 1960. Despite this knowledge, regulations to ban asbestos did not begin in the UK until 1985.

## What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral of which there are three main types, blue (crocidolite), brown (amosite) and white (chrysotile) none of which are natural to this country.

All types of asbestos are harmful but blue and brown asbestos are recognised as the most hazardous and have not been imported into the UK since 1985. White asbestos was only banned in the UK in

1999. All types of asbestos may still present in buildings and equipment produced before the ban.

It is airborne dust and fibres from asbestos which cause harm when inhaled or ingested. They are very fine and if breathed in they can reach the smallest areas of the lung where they cannot be breathed or coughed out. Once they have lodged in the lung the body tries to break them down and remove them which leads to swelling and inflammation of the surrounding area. The fibres can also penetrate the edge of the lung and settle in the lining of the lung (pleura). Here they can lead to pleural mesothelioma. The fibres can also be swallowed and in a similar way can lodge in the abdomen causing peritoneal mesothelioma.

### How is mesothelioma diagnosed?

It can take many years after being exposed to asbestos for mesothelioma to occur. The length of time taken is referred to as the latency period and is usually between 10 and 50 (or

more) years. The earliest signs of the disease can be quite vague. The most common symptoms are breathlessness, chest pain, fatigue and weight loss. Sometimes it can take a number of investigations and hospital visits to diagnose the disease.

### Treatment for mesothelioma

The treatment of mesothelioma depends on a number of things including the type of mesothelioma, how advanced the disease is, the general health and fitness of the patient and their personal preferences.

There are various treatments used to treat mesothelioma. These include measures to control symptoms in combination with radiotherapy, chemotherapy and surgery. Not all patients are suitable for every treatment. None offer a cure but they aim to minimise symptoms, maximise quality of life and for some, lengthen life. Some treatments are available through clinical trials, ask your consultant or specialist nurse for information.

**MESOTHELIOMA UK  
PROVIDES SPECIALIST, IMPARTIAL, UP TO DATE  
SUPPORT AND INFORMATION**

To sponsor or donate contact:

**Mesothelioma UK**

**CIO Registered Charity Number 1177039**

**Email: [info@mesothelioma.uk.com](mailto:info@mesothelioma.uk.com) • Freephone: 0800 169 2409**

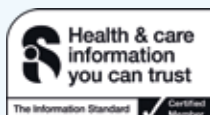
**Website: [www.mesothelioma.uk.com](http://www.mesothelioma.uk.com)**

**Reviewed by: Anne Moylan**

**Date: July 2017 • Review Date: July 2019**

Download information from **[www.mesothelioma.uk.com](http://www.mesothelioma.uk.com)**

To request a copy freephone **0800 169 2409** or email  
**[info@mesothelioma.uk.com](mailto:info@mesothelioma.uk.com)**



**MESOTHELIOMA UK**

**Supporting People With This Asbestos Cancer**