



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS about asbestos related diseases

### 1. What are the main types of asbestos lung disease?

In the human body, asbestos affects the lungs most of all. It can affect both the spongy parts as well as the outer lining of the lung. It usually causes disease in a person 10 to 50 years after they were first exposed to asbestos. The four main lung diseases caused by breathing asbestos dust are asbestosis and asbestos related pleural thickening – these are the scarring diseases, asbestos related lung cancer, and mesothelioma – these are the cancers.

### 2. What is asbestosis?

Asbestosis is an irreversible and progressive lung condition which results from the inhalation of asbestos fibres over an extended period. It occurs because asbestos fibres are inhaled into the tiny air sacs deep in the lungs, and these cause those air-sacs to thicken, which reduces the amount of oxygen taken up and the amount of carbon dioxide removed. This then causes shortness of breath and coughing.

### 3. What causes asbestosis?

Asbestosis is caused by the inhalation of asbestos fibres over an extended period. The fibres lodge in your lungs and are not expelled.

### 4. What are the symptoms of Asbestosis?

The symptoms of asbestosis are:

- Shortness of breath on exertion that worsens with age
- Cough, either dry or producing a small amount of clear sputum
- Chest pain occurs in a small percentage of patients

### 5. Is there a cure for asbestosis?

Asbestosis has no cure and no specific treatment. Because of the tiny scars in the lungs, it may eventually over years cause the sufferer to start a dry cough, and become short of breath. Sufferers are advised to avoid any further exposure to dusts or asbestos or irritants that make them cough. They should never smoke and all chest infections must be promptly treated.

### 6. What is asbestos related pleural thickening?

Sometimes scarring occurs on the thin membrane that is the outer lining of the lungs, called the pleura. When seen on chest x-ray, this scarring is called pleural plaque or pleural thickening.

### 7. Is there a cure for asbestos related pleural thickening?

Asbestos related pleural thickening has no cure, and most often there are no symptoms and also no change over time. Sufferers are advised however, to take special care of their lungs. They should never smoke and all chest infections must be promptly treated.

## **8. What is mesothelioma?**

This is cancer of the thin membrane on the outer lining of the lungs – the pleura. It is caused exclusively by asbestos, and is a very aggressive and painful cancer. These tumours can take up to 50 years to develop.

## **9. Is there a cure for mesothelioma?**

Mesothelioma is incurable, and is usually fatal within 12 months of diagnosis. Sufferers are advised to get their affairs in order as soon as possible, as decline in health occurs very rapidly in the late stages. Hospice referral should be organised immediately in order to alleviate the extreme pain, breathlessness, coughing and weakness which almost always occur.

Mesothelioma is an aggressive and incurable cancer that occurs on the outer surface of the lungs. It can also occur in the abdomen. It is caused by exposure to asbestos, usually from breathing in invisible fibres on a job where asbestos was used. The cancer starts as a weeping of the lung surface – causing pleural effusion – and then progresses to small nodules which eventually coalesce into a large thick sheet of growth which envelops and squeezes the lungs. This causes pain, breathlessness and weakness, to which sufferers then succumb. The time latency between breathing in the asbestos and the development of the disease is long – typically more than 20 years - but the risk is life-long, and increases with age. The more fibres one has breathed in and the longer the fibres stay in the lungs, the greater one's risk. The lungs are unfortunately a cul-de-sac for these microscopic fibres and they cannot be cleared nor removed. The number of fibres required to initiate mesothelioma can be relatively low, so people who are environmentally or occasionally exposed to asbestos are also at risk. Mesothelioma is remarkably quite rare even in occupationally exposed groups, but it is devastating for the individual.

Early recognition as to the cause of the pleural effusion – differentiating it from other causes like TB – is key to good medical and palliative management. Surgery is generally advised for diagnosis only.

## **10. What is asbestos related lung cancer?**

Lung cancer caused by asbestos is identical to lung cancer caused by smoking, but they are more common in people who have worked with asbestos, especially if they also had asbestosis. Asbestos and cigarette smoke work together to cause lung cancer. We cannot however predict who is going to get lung cancer. Lung cancer is usually untreatable.

## **11. What are the symptoms of asbestos related lung cancer?**

Asbestosis can lead to cancers and the symptoms are:

- Unexplained shortness of breath
- Unexplained fluid on the lungs (also called pleural effusion)
- Unexplained coughing
- Unexplained pain in the chest
- Coughing up of blood

## **12. Is there a cure for asbestos related lung cancer?**

Asbestos related lung cancer is usually incurable, and is generally fatal within 12 – 18 months. Sufferers are advised to get their affairs in order as soon as possible, as decline in health occurs very rapidly in the late stages. Hospice referral should be organised immediately in order to alleviate the symptoms of cough (often bloody cough later), shortness of breath and chest pain.

## **13. What is pneumoconiosis?**

Pneumoconiosis is a dust disease of the lung caused by breathing in excessive amounts of dust, usually from doing dusty work. Gold miners get silicosis, Coal miners get coal workers' pneumoconiosis and asbestos miners and workers get asbestosis.

## **14. What could be other causes of pneumoconiosis?**

Pneumoconiosis can be caused by any excessive dust that a person inhales.

## **15. Which diseases are compensated for the Asbestos Relief Trust and /or the Kgalagadi Relief Trust?**

Only asbestos-related dust disease is compensated by the Trusts, and only in those people exposed to certain qualifying operations, during the years when the founding companies of the Trusts (Gencor, Gefco, Msauli and Becon) owned, controlled or managed certain operations.

## **16. How do Asbestos Related Diseases develop?**

Asbestos Related Diseases develop because the little unseen spike-like fibres that are inhaled get into the lungs and stay there, causing scars and cancer to develop many years after they are breathed in.

## **17. How long do Asbestos Related Diseases take to develop?**

Exposure to asbestos fibres can cause disease in a person 10 to 50 years after they were first exposed. The risk of disease is lifelong.

## **18. How are ARDs treated?**

At present there is no curative treatment for asbestos related diseases or cancers.

For asbestosis and asbestos related pleural plaques, it is important to maintain good respiratory health with regular visits to the clinic and early treatment of any other chest diseases or infections. We also advise you to keep away from dusty or smoky areas, especially any asbestos dust, and to stop smoking.

For asbestos related lung cancers and mesotheliomas palliative care is available from clinics or hospices.

## **19. What is the minimum exposure period that puts me at risk of developing an ARD?**

There is no minimum exposure period. Any exposure to asbestos puts you at potential risk of developing an asbestos related disease.

## **20. Are asbestos related diseases contagious?**

Asbestos related diseases are not contagious.

## **21. How are asbestos related diseases diagnosed?**

Asbestos related diseases are diagnosed using the following combination of tests:

Chest x-ray, Lung function testing and medical examination. If you are suspected of having a cancer, biopsies and CT scans will be required.

## **22. I was exposed to asbestos fibre is there anyway of minimising my risk of developing ARDs?**

Any significant exposure to asbestos puts you at a lifelong risk of developing an asbestos related disease, especially if you were exposed at work.

## **23. Why do some people develop asbestosis and others develop an asbestos related cancer?**

We do not know – different people respond differently to the same toxins. Most people who are exposed to asbestos do not develop disease.

## **24. Is TB the same as asbestosis?**

Tuberculosis is not the same as asbestosis.

TB is an infectious lung disease that spreads through coughing from person to person.

Asbestosis is a dust disease of the lungs that occurs because of excessive breathing-in of asbestos dust.

## **25. Can I develop TB from being exposed to asbestos fibres?**

TB cannot develop from being exposed to asbestos fibres.

## **26. If I have asbestosis will my disease progress?**

In some cases yes, but in most cases it remains stable, provided there is no further exposure to asbestos.

## **27. I worked at an asbestos mine for all of my working life but have not been diagnosed with an ARD. My neighbour worked for a very short period at an asbestos mine and has an ARD. Why has he developed an ARD but not me?**

Some people get sick from asbestos and others do not. Anyone who has been exposed to asbestos, even non-miners, can get any of the asbestos related diseases. The more a person has been exposed, the more likely it is that they may get an asbestos disease. But most miners that the Trusts have tested do not have any asbestos related disease. The reasons for this are not clear. There is medical evidence of claimants with long exposure histories and no signs of asbestos related disease on chest x-ray and others with very short exposures who unfortunately have contracted asbestos related disease. There are also families who are more genetically susceptible to getting asbestos related disease, but more research is needed to understand this better. Approximately 30% of former

*Last updated on 25 June 2013*

mineworkers seen by the Trusts have developed asbestos disease, and about 2% of these have an asbestos related cancer.

**28. What does the Trust mean by occupational diseases?**

The Trusts use the term occupational diseases if you were exposed to asbestos at work.

**29. What does the Trust mean by environmental diseases?**

If you were exposed to asbestos in another setting, they are called environmental diseases by the Trust.