How First Responders are Affected by Asbestos



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Because first responders are the first ones on the scene when disaster strikes, they are regularly exposed to disturbed building materials and wreckage. This puts them at an increased risk for mesothelioma, a rare cancer that attacks the lungs and other vital organs.

What contains asbestos?

Structures built before the 1980’s likely used asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) during the construction process. Asbestos was used in insulation, tiling, piping, and other commonly used building materials. Because of this, fire damage inevitably disturbs these materials and releases asbestos fibers into the air.

In the past, firefighters were also at risk from asbestos exposure from their protective gear. Fireproof clothes and blankets were made with asbestos fibers because of their fire-resistant properties.

How does asbestos cause mesothelioma?

Asbestos lodges itself in the lining of the lungs when inhaled, creating inflammation and scarring. This in turn develops tumors, which ultimately cause symptoms. However, it can take 10-50 years for symptoms to be noticeable. This presents a major challenge when it comes to diagnosing mesothelioma since the tumor is often rather advanced by the time it’s noticed.

Which first responders can be affected?

Often the first responders' lung health conversation is centered around firefighters. While they have the highest risk for job-related cancers among first responders, there are many others on the scene who are also consistently exposed to toxins.

First responders at risk for mesothelioma:

- Firefighters
- Paramedics
- EMTs
- Rescue teams
- Police
- State troopers
- Servicemembers

Since 9/11, the long-term health complications of first responders have been more a part of the common dialog. When the twin towers collapsed, they released asbestos fibers into the air that embedded themselves in first responders' lungs, clothes, and even vehicles. The exposure wasn't limited to firefighters and rescue teams inside the buildings. Everyone who responded and was on the ground was at risk. The effects of the 9/11 asbestos exposure are still being understood because of the cancer's long latency period.

What do I do if I know I've been exposed?

As a first responder, your lung health should be a top priority. There are a few things you can do to watch for mesothelioma if you know you've been exposed:

- Let your doctor know of exposure
- Learn and watch for the symptoms of mesothelioma
- Get checkups often in the hopes of detecting it early

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with mesothelioma, there are many options to help pay for treatments depending on where the exposure happened. Look into funds set up for victims or consider legal action.

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