

Health Forum Q&A

See below key questions and answers responded to by ACT Health Officials at the two Taskforce and ACT Health forums held in July and August 2014.

Note: The questions below have been responded to by Senior ACT Health Officials, including: ACT Chief Health Officer Dr Andrew Pengilley and Senior Respiratory Specialist Professor Mark Hurwitz.

My children were exposed to Mr Fluffy asbestos during our home renovation. What health checks are there for children, and what age is it appropriate to have them tested?

For children under the age of 16 years, no testing is recommended if they are not showing any concerning respiratory symptoms. The risks of radiation exposure from x-ray and CT scanning is considered to be of greater risk to young children and therefore not recommended until they are fully developed. Parents are recommended to advise their children's GP that their child is a resident of a home containing loose-fill asbestos.

Are children more at risk than adults of developing lung related diseases after exposure to loose fill asbestos?

There is a lack of clear clinical research on this specific question. However, we do know that a significant risk factor is cumulative exposure and children are unlikely, due to their age, to have been exposed for prolonged periods of time. We believe, based on current information that the risk to children is about the same as the risk to adults.

Is it possible for loose fill fibres to be ingested rather than inhaled and if so, does this bring on other forms of cancer?

It is possible for fibres to be ingested. Most evidence from research of large asbestos exposures indicates most asbestos related diseases are from inhalation.

Isn't there enough ACT data available now to determine what the actual risk of loose fill asbestos is?

ACT Epidemiologists are still collecting ACT specific data, and a precise estimate of the risk of living in a house with loose fill asbestos will require a dedicated epidemiological study. However, the information collected thus far on mesothelioma trends in the ACT, and what is known about the risks in other highly exposed populations, suggests the risk remains low.

Should people register with the National Asbestos Exposure Register and is there a way for the register to include Mr Fluffy as an exposure cause?

Yes, people are encouraged to register their exposure on the National Register. The Taskforce has worked with the Commonwealth to have loose fill asbestos listed as an exposure cause on the register.

Is mesothelioma treatable?

Treatment for mesothelioma has certainly improved over the years and some of the treatments have been successful for some patients. However not all cases are curable.

Will the ACT Government fund research into treatment and cures of mesothelioma?

There has been significant research done into asbestos related disease and treatments in Western Australia and this research is considered to be best practice nationally. Some epidemiological research will be conducted into the ACT situation however it will not be of the magnitude of the WA clinical research.

I wore a respirator during my home renovation, does that reduce my risk?

Yes, if worn correctly, this would have reduced your risk of exposure during the renovation.

I've been in my house for over 30 years, what symptoms should I be looking out for?

In the first instance, we recommend you visit your GP. If your GP is concerned, they may suggest that you have some preliminary screening done. Some of the symptoms of asbestosis include:

- shortness of breath
- weight loss
- exhaustion
- tiredness
- a cough

However these can also be symptoms of other respiratory related illness, which is why it is important to speak with your GP.

Knowing that I've been exposed, should I have a baseline x-ray done and then repeat this every 5 years?

A 'baseline' Chest X-ray can be helpful in assisting with the interpretation of any changes which are seen in future X-rays by providing a 'before and after' comparison.

Chest x-ray is not a sensitive test for detecting asbestos related disease, including mesothelioma, which is not otherwise causing symptoms. In addition to not detecting disease, repeated x-rays represent additional exposure to radiation as well as increasing the chance of 'false alarms' where something is thought to be detected on x-ray but is actually benign. There is no evidence that regular x-rays have any effect on the outcome of asbestos related disease in people who have been exposed to asbestos.

For this reason x-ray is not recommended as a screening test for asbestos related disease. Individuals may, however, choose to have x-rays after a discussion of the risk with their doctor.

If I have an x-ray, will it show me the amount of asbestos in my lungs?

No, an x-ray will not show you the amount of asbestos that is in your body.

Now that I know I've been exposed, what are some things I should do to stay as healthy as possible?

A healthy lifestyle is important for everyone and ways to achieve a healthy lifestyle include eating well, exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight and not smoking.

I have pre-existing conditions and health concerns, does this make me more at risk?

No, there is no evidence that pre-existing health conditions place you at greater risk.

Whilst living in a Mr Fluffy home, I/my partner was pregnant – does loose fill asbestos exposure have any impact on the baby whilst in the womb?

There is no risk of loose asbestos fibres getting into the baby's lungs whilst it is in the womb.

I have already gone past the latency period and have not contracted any asbestos related disease. Does this mean that I will not develop anything in the future?

The latency period is a time before which disease is unlikely to occur, and in most cases it is several decades after exposure to asbestos. However, there is no time after exposure when the risk of asbestos related disease returns to normal. The risk increases with cumulative exposure, so the longer you continue to be exposed (even beyond the latency period) the greater the risk.

My children have asthma, does this make them more at risk of getting mesothelioma?

No, children with asthma are not at higher risk of getting asbestos related diseases.

Updated: 22 August 2014