

About Mesothelioma - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'About mesothelioma' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

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What is mesothelioma?

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer. It is a cancer of mesothelial cells. These cells cover the outer surface of most of our internal body organs, forming a lining that is sometimes called the mesothelium. So this is where this type of cancer gets its name. Mesothelioma can develop in the tissues covering the lungs and the abdomen.

Mesothelioma in the chest

The tissues lining (or covering) the lungs are called the pleura. Mesothelioma is most often diagnosed in the pleura. This is known as pleural mesothelioma.

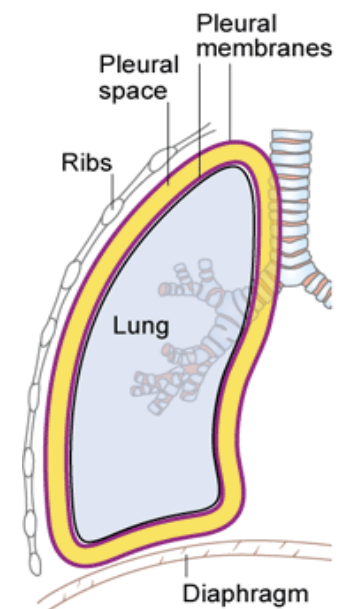


Diagram of the lung showing the pleura
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Mesothelioma in the abdomen

The tissue lining the abdomen is called the peritoneum. Mesothelioma that develops in this tissue is known as peritoneal mesothelioma. This type of cancer is much less common than pleural mesothelioma. It is unusual for mesothelioma to spread to other parts of the body. But if it does, it does not usually cause troublesome symptoms.



Mesothelioma risks and causes

Mesothelioma is quite a rare cancer, but it is becoming more common. In the UK mesothelioma is much more common in men than women.

Asbestos

By far the main cause of mesothelioma is exposure to asbestos. Between 7 and 8 out of every 10 people diagnosed with mesothelioma (70 to 80%) say they have been in contact with asbestos. Your risk is greater if you were exposed to large amounts of it from an early age for a very long period of time. But some people say they have no history of any heavy exposure to asbestos.

Other risk factors

In people who have been exposed to asbestos, contact with a virus called SV40 may make it more likely that they will develop mesothelioma. Another risk factor is exposure to radiation from a chemical called thorium dioxide (Thorotrast). A mineral found in Turkey called Zeolite may also cause mesothelioma.

Screening for mesothelioma

Screening means testing people for early stages of a disease before they have any symptoms. Before screening for any type of cancer can be carried out, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer. Diagnosing mesothelioma can be difficult. The usual tests for lung diseases often appear to be negative with mesothelioma.

People who have been exposed to asbestos have a higher risk of mesothelioma

and may benefit from regular check-ups and possibly tests. If you think you have been exposed to asbestos in the past, talk to your doctor.

Mesothelioma symptoms

In its early stages, mesothelioma does not have many symptoms. When symptoms do develop, they are often caused by the cancer growing and pressing on a nerve or other body organ.

The symptoms of pleural mesothelioma are pain in the lower back or the side of the chest, a persistent cough, shortness of breath, a hoarse or husky voice, losing more than 10% of your weight when not dieting, difficulty swallowing, sweating and high temperatures.

The symptoms of peritoneal mesothelioma are pain in the abdomen (tummy), swelling in the abdomen, feeling or being sick, poor appetite, losing more than 10% of your weight when not dieting, diarrhoea or constipation.

All of these symptoms are more likely to be caused by some other illness, rather than by mesothelioma. But if you have these symptoms, see your doctor. This is particularly important if you have been exposed to asbestos in the past.

Types of mesothelioma

There are 2 main types of mesothelioma

- Pleural mesothelioma
- Peritoneal mesothelioma

The pleural type grows in the tissues covering the lungs. The peritoneal type grows in the tissue lining the inside of the abdomen. Pleural mesothelioma is much



more common than peritoneal mesothelioma.

Cell types

Mesothelioma is also grouped according to how the cells look under a microscope. When mesothelioma is grouped this way, there are 3 types

- Epithelioid
- Sarcomatoid or fibrous
- Mixed type (also called Biphasic type)

These types of mesothelioma cells can be further divided into other types called clear cell, small cell, acinar cell and tubopapillary cell.

Should I see a mesothelioma specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much more minor. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide which symptoms need an urgent referral to a specialist.

Urgent chest X-ray

The guidelines say your GP should send you for an urgent chest X-ray if you have been exposed to asbestos in the past and have any of the following symptoms

- New chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Unexplained symptoms that last for more than 3 weeks, such as shoulder pain, cough or weight loss

Urgent referral to a specialist

According to the guidelines, you should ideally get an urgent referral to a specialist

within 2 weeks of going to the GP for any of the following reasons

- If results of your urgent chest X-ray shows anything abnormal
- If you have been exposed to asbestos in the past, and have recently developed chest pain and shortness of breath.

If you have symptoms and you do not think your GP is taking them seriously enough, you could take this information along to an appointment.

What to ask your doctor about mesothelioma

- Can you explain what mesothelioma is?
- How would I know if I had mesothelioma?
- I may have been exposed to asbestos at work. What should I do?
- Can I be screened for mesothelioma?
- Are my family at risk of mesothelioma if I have been exposed to asbestos?
- What should they do?
- What are the symptoms of mesothelioma?



Notes

More information

For more information about mesothelioma, visit our website
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in December 2010. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2010. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).