

Mesothelioma

by Christine LaLonde

Mesothelioma is a rare, fatal cancer. Its only confirmed cause is exposure to asbestos, the mineral that is present in thousands of products in countless buildings across the U.S. People can contract mesothelioma after inadvertently breathing in the microscopic fibers of asbestos that are in the air.

Often Misdiagnosed

It's estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 people die each year from mesothelioma in the U.S. The numbers are difficult to verify because mesothelioma is often misdiagnosed as another type of cancer.

Mesothelioma usually attacks the mesothelium, which is the tissue lining inside the chest cavity, around the lungs and heart. It can also attack the stomach lining, the pericardium (the tissue covering the heart), and other internal organs. Many physicians are not familiar with mesothelioma, and they may not recognize it when they encounter it.

A Long Latency Period

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), most of the cases of mesothelioma are diagnosed at least 30 years after the patient's first exposure to asbestos. The diagnosis is most common among asbestos workers (civilian and military), their family members, and people who live close to asbestos mines.

Mesothelioma Symptoms and Life Expectancy

The life expectancy for a person who has been diagnosed with mesothelioma is only about 18 months, but this can vary widely, depending on the patient's age, general health, medical history, stage of the disease, and other factors. It's good to be aware of the warning symptoms of mesothelioma, because the sooner it is found and diagnosed, the better the chances of a longer life expectancy.

The symptoms and signs of mesothelioma that may be experienced are:

- a mass in the abdomen
- abdominal pain and/or swelling
- anemia, fatigue
- buildup of fluid in the abdomen
- bowel problems
- chest pain
- cough, wheezing, and/or hoarseness
- pain under the rib cage
- shortness of breath
- weight loss

Treatment for Mesothelioma

Although there's no cure yet for mesothelioma, there are treatments that may help slow its progression and metastasis (spreading). These include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and combination therapy.

If you think that you may have mesothelioma, or that someone in your family may be at risk for this cancer, be sure to talk with your doctor about it as soon as possible.