

Workers suffer asbestosis long after exposures have ended

Asbestos-related disease among sheet metal workers 1986-2004: radiographic changes over time

Laura Welch and Elizabeth Haile. American Journal of Industrial Medicine, July 2009.

Overview

Sheet metal workers do not apply asbestos insulation, but are often exposed to asbestos in the course of installation, repair and renovation of HVAC systems or in shipbuilding, repair and refitting. Under a cooperative labor-management occupational health initiative, 18,211 sheet metal workers with at least 20 years of experience in the trade received a medical screening (including chest X-rays) between 1986 and 2004. Researchers identified 2,181 workers whose initial chest x-rays indicated no symptoms of pneumoconiosis (dust-related occupational lung disease) at first examination. Comparing the baseline data with results from a follow-up x-ray years later, researchers found disturbing evidence that nearly 400 had suffered newly-developed pleural and/or parenchymal disease.

Key Findings

- Asbestosis should be considered an active disease three decades after exposure ends. Even 30 years after most asbestos use in the construction industry was eliminated, workers continue to develop new cases of asbestos-related respiratory diseases.
- Of the 2,181 workers examined, 115 (5.3%) showed parenchymal disease (with or without pleural disease), and 270 (12.4%) showed evidence of pleural disease alone (without parenchymal disease).
- Both smoking and shipyard work were associated with elevated risk of asbestosis and other asbestos-related diseases.
- Workers exposed to asbestos in the construction industry need continued medical surveillance for early detection of disease.

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See abstract:

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