



Fact sheet for healthcare providers: Residential exposure to asbestos and risk of harmful health effects

Background: Asbestos is a naturally-occurring mineral that is now banned in the United States due to severe health effects including mesothelioma (a fatal type of lung cancer), asbestosis (parenchymal lung opacities) and some gastrointestinal cancers.

Exposure: Most exposures to asbestos fibers in the US occur among workers who come in contact with asbestos-containing building materials during plumbing, maintenance, and demolition activities. However, non-occupational exposures may occur via inhalation in buildings with deteriorated asbestos-containing building materials.

Health effects: Asbestos is a known carcinogen that can cause mesothelioma and other types of lung cancer. Asbestosis is a type of pneumoconiosis characterized by pleural plaques and opacities in lung parenchyma. Exposure to asbestos is also linked to some GI cancers. Smoking adds a multiplicative risk for lung cancer when combined with asbestos exposure.

Symptoms of mesothelioma or asbestosis include: shortness of breath, coughing, fatigue, and vague feelings of sickness.

What is known about the exposure to asbestos among residents in the 737 side of the Grant Avenue Apartments in Chicago Heights, Illinois?

As a result of inspection at the site where disturbed asbestos materials were identified during construction/rehab activities, the decision was made to relocate all residents and perform a thorough cleaning of all units and belongings. It is not known if air levels in the building exceed published benchmarks such as the OSHA Permissible Exposure Limit of 0.1 fibers per cubic centimeter of air.

What are the risks to exposed residents?

The vast majority of mesothelioma and asbestosis cases occur in workers exposed to high levels of asbestos for many years. However, exposure to any level of asbestos increases risk for cancer. Mesothelioma has a latency of 30-40 yrs, and lung cancer has a latency of 15-20 yrs. Therefore, the risk of current exposure to asbestos will not become evident for decades.

What can healthcare providers do?

OSHA recommends workers with exposure to asbestos undergo regular surveillance for health effects with questionnaires, spirometry, and chest x-rays. There is no recommended approach to surveillance of non-occupationally exposed persons, but following OSHA surveillance guidelines may be considered, including the following:

- a) Questionnaire: In addition to asking about symptoms of persistent cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, and fatigue, include questions related to:

- length of exposure, if known (hours per day, days/month/weeks of total exposure)
 - any known air levels or fiber count of asbestos in indoor air
 - history of prior dust exposure from occupational sources or hobbies
 - history of smoking or vaping
- b. Chest X-ray and spirometry, baseline and periodic with frequency determined by level and duration of exposure.
- c. Advise patient to notify you if any symptoms develop in the future.

Where can I go for help?

Feel free to contact the Great Lakes Center for Children's Environmental Health/ Region 5 Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit at the University of Illinois Chicago by email: childrensenviron@uic.edu or voicemail: 312-355-0597.

Fact sheet for residents from Illinois Department of Public Health: <https://epa.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/epa/topics/community-relations/sites/grant-avenue-apartments/IDPH%20Guidance%20on%20asbestos%20exposure.pdf>

References

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May 2026. Great Lakes Center for Children's Environmental Health/ Region 5 Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit (PEHSU), Susan Buchanan, MD, MPH, Director. The Region 5 PEHSU is part of a national network of experts in children's environmental health who provide quality medical consultation for health professionals, parents, caregivers, and patients on health risks due to natural or human-made environmental hazards.

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