



## HEALTH INFORMATION

# Inadvertent Asbestos Exposure

Concern can understandably arise from situations where employees are inadvertently exposed to asbestos during the course of their work. It is important that appropriate health advice is provided to employees in these situations. Health risks should be kept in perspective and worry minimised.

The questions and answers set out below address key issues that usually arise in these situations:

### Q. What are the health risks caused by exposure to asbestos?

**A.** Occasional low level exposure, such as has recently occurred in your work, is associated with a very low risk of health problems. Many people are exposed to asbestos fibres unknowingly during the course of their lives, yet the development of health problems is very rare.

### Q. What are the health problems associated with asbestos?

**A.** Asbestos exposure can cause several respiratory conditions including a thickening and loss of elasticity of lung tissue (asbestosis) as well as lung cancer including mesothelioma. The risk of lung cancer is increased significantly if you smoke.

### Q. How long do health problems take to develop?

**A.** Health problems do not occur immediately but can develop 30-40 years after significant exposure.

### Q. Are there any tests that I can have to identify whether I have, or will develop, an asbestos related health problem?

**A.** Tests including x-rays, blood tests, scans and lung function tests (spirometry) are not helpful following low level occasional asbestos exposures. Tests are only useful if you have respiratory symptoms including a cough, wheeze, shortness of breath or if you experience other symptoms such as weight loss. There is no test that can confirm whether you will develop an asbestos related health problem in the future.

### Q. What can I do if I am concerned about my health following the exposure?

**A.** Employees should record the asbestos exposure and complete a confidential asbestos exposure questionnaire. This will be reviewed by the occupational health team and maintained in your occupational health file. If necessary a consultation with an occupational health practitioner can be arranged. This will give you the opportunity to discuss in confidence any related health concerns. You should also inform your GP for their records.

