

# About Mesothelioma

## A Quick Guide

### Contents

This is a brief summary of 'About mesothelioma' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- What is mesothelioma?
- Mesothelioma risks and causes
- Screening for mesothelioma
- Mesothelioma symptoms
- Types of mesothelioma
- Should I see a mesothelioma specialist?
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

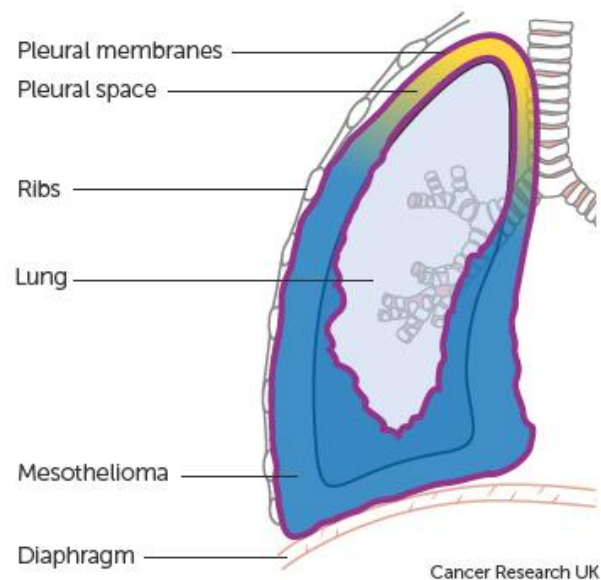
### What is mesothelioma?

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 (the area of the body below the ribs and lungs and above the hip bones).

### 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.



### 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. It is estimated that in the UK more than 9 out of 10 men with mesothelioma and more than 8 out of 10 women with mesothelioma 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 but this is not certain. There is some evidence that exposure to radiation radiotherapy treatment or from a chemical called thorium dioxide (Thorotrast) may raise mesothelioma risk. But the evidence is not very clear. A mineral found in Turkey called erionite, and working as a painter, may raise the risk.

### **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.

There is currently no reliable screening test for mesothelioma. The aim of screening is to pick up cancers at an early stage of the disease before symptoms develop. At the moment it can be difficult to diagnose mesothelioma. The usual tests for lung diseases often appear to be negative.

### **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

- Chest pain
- A persistent cough
- Shortness of breath
- Weight loss when not dieting
- Tiredness (fatigue)
- Changes in the shape of the fingers or nails (finger clubbing)
- Loss of appetite
- 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 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 Care Excellence (NICE) have produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide which symptoms need an urgent referral to a specialist.

## Who needs an urgent chest X-ray

The guidelines say your GP should send you for an urgent chest X-ray (within 2 weeks), if you are aged 40 or over with the following symptoms

- Changes in the shape of your fingers and nails (finger clubbing)
- Chest symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pain, cough or tiredness (fatigue) that could be signs of lung disease

## Who needs a chest X-ray

The guidelines say your GP should offer you a chest X-ray if you are aged 40 or over and have 2 or more of the following symptoms, or if you have 1 or more of the following symptoms and have ever smoked or have been exposed to asbestos

- A cough
- Tiredness (fatigue)
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite

## Urgent referral to a specialist

According to the guidelines, you should get an urgent referral to a specialist within 2 weeks

- If the results of your chest X-ray suggest you might have mesothelioma

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?
- Can I be screened for mesothelioma?
- Could other people in my family also have mesothelioma if I have been exposed to asbestos?
- What should they do?
- What are the symptoms of mesothelioma?
- Can you tell me how to claim compensation if I have been exposed to asbestos?

## Notes

**For more information**, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

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 trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

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

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