

Asbestos: A Naval Blunder

Beginning in the World War II era, the U.S. Navy started fitting its vessels with materials containing asbestos, a highly toxic compound hailed for natural heat and fire resistance. From the 1930s through the mid-1970s, all branches of the military used asbestos-containing products in buildings and all forms of transportation. Though every division of the armed forces widely used asbestos, the Navy found even more uses for the heat-resistant substance aboard its vessels.

More than 300 products containing asbestos were used in ships and shipyards, mainly in engine and boiler rooms and other areas below deck for fireproofing. Veterans who worked below deck were heavily exposed to asbestos, but no sailor was safe, as the caustic chemical was used in navigation rooms, mess halls, and sleeping quarters. In addition, products such as cables, gaskets, valves, adhesives and many others contained asbestos. To read more about asbestos-containing products used by the Navy, see "Common Asbestos Products in Shipyards and Ships," at www.Asbestos.com.

Countless sailors were literally showered in asbestos particles aboard vessels. Many recall sleeping below asbestos-covered pipes and having to shake fallen toxic flakes off bunks daily. Because of its jagged atomic structure, asbestos is very fragile and breaks into particles readily. The minuscule particles are easily inhaled and adhere to the internal lining of the lungs, abdomen, and heart. Once inhaled, the body cannot expel or break down the chemical. Asbestos fibers collect in the body and slowly wreak havoc at a cellular level. Due to a long latency period, asbestos causes illness much later in life, such as asbestosis (a respiratory disease), lung cancer, and mesothelioma (an aggressive cancer that attacks the lining of the lungs, heart, and abdomen). Extended exposure to asbestos can lead to a variety of deadly diseases, but even a single account of asbestos exposure may potentially lead to illness later in life.

It wasn't until the 1970s that the military started phasing out asbestos, and relative usage sustained until the '80s. Regardless of scientific evidence, the military still uses asbestos in comparatively lesser amounts. Many Americans are under a false impression that the use of asbestos was banned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1989. Unfortunately, in 1991, the EPA's effort to ban asbestos was overturned by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals.

Like many other veterans dealing with the burden of proving their illnesses are caused by toxic exposure during service, such as those suffering from Agent Orange

exposure, numerous veterans are not receiving proper medical attention for their service-connected conditions. Reluctantly, veterans suffering with asbestos-related diseases find themselves in a unique and troubling situation, as they virtually have no means to seek compensation through the current government system. Ailing veterans are prohibited by law from seeking compensation from the U.S. government through the court system. Veterans are permitted to apply for Veteran Affairs (VA) benefits for asbestos-related diseases, but this often proves fruitless, as providing irrefutable evidence is nearly unattainable and very strenuous.

Because of the military's prevalent use of asbestos, veterans who served from the World War II area through the Vietnam War are at risk of developing asbestos-related illnesses, such as asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. Unfortunately, the symptoms linked with asbestos-induced diseases are notoriously non-specific and are commonly mistaken as other disorders. Particularly in the early developing stages, symptoms are misleadingly indicative of other illnesses. For example, the early warning signs of pleural mesothelioma (which attacks the internal lining of the lungs) are very similar to those of pneumonia and influenza. Respectively, symptoms of pericardial mesothelioma (which effects the lining of the heart) regularly resemble a variety of other cardiac conditions. Depending on the location of the mesothelioma cancer (most commonly in the lungs, abdomen, and heart), symptoms can range from respiratory problems to fever to chest pain. To read more about symptoms concerning asbestos-related illnesses, see "Symptoms" at www.Asbestos.com.

For more information regarding the issues facing veterans and exposure to asbestos, please visit www.Asbestos.com, an essential online resource raising public awareness on the dangers of asbestos.