

# **Asbestos Disease Among Railroad Workers**

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Railroad workers are exposed to many harmful substances at work but few have affected so many as asbestos. Asbestos has been widely used by railroads in many forms, including as insulation on steam and diesel locomotives. Railroad repair shops and buildings frequently contained many types of asbestos products. Steam engines were covered from end to end with asbestos insulation. The engine rooms of diesel engines contained asbestos pipe covering on many parts of the engine. Many diesel engines had steam generators that were covered with asbestos that engineers were exposed to. It has been used in boiler insulation, steam generators, pipe covering, cabooses, gaskets, electrical panels, wallboard, plaster and brake shoes, just to name a few. As a result, many railroad workers may have been exposed to this toxic and carcinogenic substance and not even known it. Some even brought it home on their work cloths exposing family members who handled their laundry.

## ***What does asbestos cause?***

Asbestos causes a form of fibrosis of the lungs known as Asbestosis. This disease involves a process where healthy lung tissue is replaced with scarred lung tissue. Asbestosis is what is known as a "latent disease." This means it does not develop at the time a person is exposed and can take as long as 30 to 50 years to show up. Symptoms normally manifest themselves in the form of shortness of breath or a dry cough that does not clear. Individuals may have lung damage due to asbestos and have no symptoms at all. Many workers mistakenly relate breathing changes to advanced age but they are in reality caused by lung damage from asbestos.

## ***Does Asbestos causes cancer?***

Yes. Mesothelioma is a rare but fatal cancer that is mainly associated with asbestos exposure. Although some treatments are used to attempt to prolong the victim's life, none have been effective at curing this devastating disease. We have seen Mesothelioma cases in railroaders as young as age 58. Life expectancy of a mesothelioma patient is usually only 6-12 months from the date of diagnosis. Other cancers, including cancers of the lung and gastrointestinal tract (including esophagus, stomach, colon, and bladder), have been associated with asbestos.

## ***What did the railroads know about asbestos?***

Documents show that the railroads knew as early as the 1930s that asbestos could cause lung disease. Records subpoenaed from the America Association of Railroads prove that the Chief Medical Officers of the railroads met in the 1930s and discussed ways to prevent this disease. Despite this knowledge, workers were never provided protection or warned of the dangers of the products they worked around. Many workers have become ill or died from this disease and never realized their illnesses were related to asbestos exposure.

### ***How can you find out if you have an asbestos caused lung disease?***

A current chest x-ray read by a radiologist or pulmonary specialist familiar with asbestos disease can determine if any damage exists. Specialized training is necessary to diagnose an asbestos caused disease. The changes asbestos causes on chest x-ray are subtle and are often missed by doctors who are not accustomed to diagnosing asbestos caused disease. Your family doctor may not be trained in the diagnosis of dust diseases of the lungs and may mis-diagnose breathing problems. Symptoms such as shortness of breath and coughing are often attributed to the aging process, smoking, or other breathing disorders.

### ***What are my legal rights if I have lung disease or cancer caused by my railroad work?***

The Federal Employers' Liability Act (FELA) allows railroad workers to recover damages for on-the-job injuries, including occupational diseases such as cancer and asbestosis. This is true even though the condition may not have developed until many years after they retired from the railroad. You must file your case in court within 3 years from when you know or should know you have a job related disease. If the employee has died, suit must be filed within 3 years of his death. If pursuing this type of claim you should seek out an attorney who has a history of experience with FELA asbestos claims.

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