



## Safety Bulletin 105

### 'Baby boom' carpenters at greatest risk of developing asbestos related cancer

One in 17 British carpenters born in the 1940s will die of mesothelioma - a cancer of the lining of the lung caused by asbestos - according to new research<sup>[1]\*</sup> published in the British Journal of Cancer.

In the largest global study of its kind - funded by Cancer Research UK and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) - more than 600 patients with mesothelioma and 1 400 healthy people were interviewed to examine UK rates of the disease linked to different occupations.

The researchers have calculated that men born in the 1940s who worked as carpenters for more than 10 years before they reached 30 have a lifetime risk for mesothelioma of about one in 17. For plumbers, electricians and decorators born in the same decade who worked in their trade for more than 10 years before they were 30, the risk is one in 50 and for other construction workers one in 125.

For every case of mesothelioma, asbestos also causes about one case of lung cancer so the overall risk of asbestos related cancer for this particular group of carpenters is about one in 10.

The risk was also increased in other industries and the study showed that two-thirds of all British men and one quarter of women had worked in jobs involving potential asbestos exposure at some time in their lives. There was also a small increased risk in those who had lived with someone who had been exposed to asbestos.

The risk of mesothelioma for the rest of the UK population who haven't experienced these occupational exposures is about one in 1,000 and these apparently unexposed cases account for 60 per cent of all mesotheliomas in women\*\* and 15 per cent in men.

Professor Julian Peto, Cancer Research UK epidemiologist and lead researcher based at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said: "The UK has the highest death rate from mesothelioma in the world. The risk is highest in people who were exposed to asbestos before age 30. By getting information on all the jobs people had ever done we have shown that the risk in some occupations, particularly in the building industry, is higher than we previously thought.

*"New regulations introduced in 1970 reduced exposure to asbestos in factories but heavy exposure to the much larger workforce in construction and various other industries continued."*

Steve Coldrick, Head of HSE's Disease Reduction Programme, said:

*"The Health and Safety Executive and Cancer Research UK commissioned this research to learn more about the impact of asbestos related cancers upon our workforce, but particularly for those born in the 1940s who have potentially been more exposed to asbestos than later born tradesmen. This research demonstrates that HSE has been correctly targeting the workers who are most at risk to asbestos exposure. HSE remains committed to raising awareness of the dangers of working with asbestos through our work streams and activities such as the 'Hidden Killer' campaign."*

"We must continue to remember that asbestos maintained in good condition on-site is not a threat unless it's disturbed and the fibres become airborne. Also, other potential 'risk factors' such as residence in certain



types of housing, living near industrial sites, or engagement in DIY activity, were not associated with an increased risk."

*"In 2010, the second part of this research should provide more information about the role of amosite in causing mesothelioma in the younger generation. This is underway now and will provide valuable information about the extent of recent exposure levels (compared to past exposure levels) on our future tradesmen."*

There are three main types of asbestos - **white, blue and brown.**

White asbestos was the type most commonly used in the UK. Blue asbestos was not used in Britain after 1970, but the use of brown asbestos continued into the 1980s, and carpenters often cut and drilled brown asbestos insulation board with power tools. The researchers believe this was a major factor underlying Britain's mesothelioma epidemic.

There are just over 2 100 people diagnosed with mesothelioma in the UK each year with about five times as many cases in men as in women.

Dr Lesley Walker, Cancer Research UK's director of information, said:

*"This research is important in revealing who is at greatest risk from asbestos exposure. We now need to ensure that accurate information for workers and regulation of the asbestos still in buildings keeps pace with what we've learned."*

## Notes

1. \*Occupational, domestic and environmental mesothelioma risk in the British population: a case-control study. BJC  
\*\*This is higher than the overall rate in women in most other countries, suggesting that many of these unexplained cases were caused by unrecognised environmental asbestos exposures which occurred in certain situations because of the widespread use of asbestos during the 1960s and 1970s.
2. There are two types of cancer related to asbestos use, mesothelioma and asbestos related lung cancer.
3. Lifetime risk for carpenters born in the 1940s who did more than 10 years of relevant work before the age of 30 is 5.9 per cent, 2 per cent for plumbers, electricians and decorators and 0.8 per cent for other construction workers (born in the 1940s).
4. The HSE Board has overall responsibility for occupational health and safety regulations in Great Britain, and HSE and Local Authorities are the enforcing authorities that work in support of the Board. For more information on health and safety at work visit [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)<sup>[2]</sup> Information on worker involvement can be found at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/involvement/><sup>[3]</sup>
5. For more information on asbestos or the Hidden Killer campaign, visit [www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/hiddenkiller/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/hiddenkiller/)<sup>[4]</sup> During the last campaign period (Oct / Nov 08 over 530 000 information packs were distributed via HSE and its partner organisations and HSE's Infoline received averages of 380 calls a day in October and 375 a day in November.
6. Together with its partners and supporters, Cancer Research UK's vision is to beat cancer.



7.

- ✚ Cancer Research UK carries out world-class research to improve understanding of the disease and find out how to prevent, diagnose and treat different kinds of cancer.
- ✚ Cancer Research UK ensures that its findings are used to improve the lives of all cancer patients.
- ✚ Cancer Research UK helps people to understand cancer, the progress that is being made and the choices each person can make.
- ✚ Cancer Research UK works in partnership with others to achieve the greatest impact in the global fight against cancer. For further information about Cancer Research UK's work or to find out how to support the charity, please call 020 7009 8820 or visit [www.cancerresearchuk.org.uk](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org.uk)<sup>[5]</sup>.

8. The British Journal of Cancer (BJC) is owned by Cancer Research UK. Its mission is to encourage communication of the very best cancer research from laboratories and clinics in all countries. Broad coverage, its editorial independence and consistent high standards have made BJC one of the world's premier general cancer journals. [www.bjcancer.com](http://www.bjcancer.com)

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