

Britain's death toll from asbestos at crisis level, figures reveal

Deaths from 'industrial disease' reaching peak after widespread use between 1950s and 70s

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Mavis Nye was diagnosed with cancer 50 years after exposure to her husband's overalls: 'He used to come home with it all in his hair and on his clothes. It was just dust to me.'

Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian

The death toll from asbestos exposure has reached crisis levels in Britain, the Guardian has learned, as people pay the price for "criminal failings by industry and government" made decades ago.

Asbestos-related cancers can occur as many as 50 years after exposure and deaths are now thought to be reaching their peak, years after the widespread industrial use of the carcinogen between the 1950s and 70s.

According to figures from the [Health](#) and Safety Executive (HSE) released this week, in 2017 there were 2,523 deaths from mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the organs caused almost exclusively by the inhalation of asbestos fibres. This is a similar number to the previous five years.

[Chart](#)

Rates of mesothelioma, which is almost always fatal, nearly doubled between 1995, when there were 1,317 cases, and 2017. More than half of deaths from mesothelioma were people over 75 and 82% were men.

It is estimated that a similar number of people die from asbestos-related lung cancers, but this cannot be so accurately measured as establishing a cause for lung cancer is more difficult.

The HSE predicts that annual numbers will continue at current levels for the rest of this decade before starting to decline, though it has previously anticipated earlier falls.

Asbestos, a naturally occurring fibrous mineral, was widely used in the UK as insulation and a fire retardant. The import and use of blue and brown asbestos was banned in 1985, while white asbestos, which is thought to be less dangerous, was banned in 1999.

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Deaths from mesothelioma are high among people who worked in the shipbuilding and construction industries – especially carpenters, plumbers and electricians – as well as those who worked in factories that produced asbestos products.

Roger Maddocks, a partner with the law firm Irwin Mitchell LLP who specialises in workplace injuries and illness, said: “In many cases people are now paying the price for criminal failings by industry and the government, who were responsible for the lack of action on the part of the Factory Inspectorate [the precursor to the HSE].”

Q&A

What is asbestos and why is it dangerous?

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Asbestos is a term for a group of minerals made of microscopic fibres. It was used in building construction for insulation, for flooring and roofing, and was sprayed on ceilings and walls. It is banned in the UK but can be found in buildings built or refurbished before 2000.

When materials that contain asbestos are disturbed or damaged, fibres are released into the air. When these fibres are inhaled they can cause serious diseases including:

- **Mesothelioma** – a cancer that affects the lining of the lungs.
- **Asbestos-related lung cancer.**
- **Asbestosis** – a serious scarring of the lung that occurs after heavy exposure to asbestos over many years. It can cause shortness of breath, and in severe cases can be fatal.
- **Pleural thickening** – the lining of the lung thickens and swells. The lung itself can be squeezed, causing shortness of breath and discomfort in the chest.

The Health and Safety Executive estimates that about 5,000 people die every year in the UK from asbestos-caused cancers, which can develop decades after exposure. About 20 tradespeople die each week as a result of past exposure.

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Maddocks said the Factory Inspectorate knew by the end of the 19th century that heavy exposure to asbestos carried the risk of life-threatening respiratory disease and that by the 1960s it was public knowledge that exposure to small amounts of the substance carried the risk of mesothelioma.

“Despite that people continued to be exposed, and in many cases heavily exposed, for years if not decades after the mid-60s,” he said.

An HSE spokesperson said that while controls on the use of blue asbestos were introduced by 1970, the dangers of brown asbestos were not appreciated until well into that decade. The heavy use of brown asbestos is a key reason why the UK, along with Australia, has the highest mesothelioma rates in the world.

“With the benefit of hindsight it is now obvious that it should have been banned earlier but the specific evidence about brown asbestos was slower to emerge and at the time it would have been more difficult to see this,” they said.

Analysis of data shared with the Guardian by the Royal College of Physicians found that NHS trusts in former industrial areas had diagnosed the highest numbers of mesothelioma cases in 2014 to 2016.

Northumbria Healthcare NHS foundation trust and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS trust diagnosed 118 each in that period. Leeds and Portsmouth diagnosed 107 and 106 respectively.

Guardian analysis of coroners’ figures found evidence of the huge toll that Britain’s industrial past has taken on the health of people across the country.

In Nottinghamshire, North Northumberland and Sunderland, one in four deaths examined by coroners were found to be caused by “industrial disease”. A large proportion of these deaths are thought to be asbestos-related, though they will also include conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and silicosis.

There were 2,709 “deaths by industrial disease” recorded by coroners in England and Wales in 2018, a 44% rise on the 1,878 recorded in 1995, the earliest available figure. Nine percent of all deaths recorded by coroners in 2018 were caused by industrial disease.

Jo Ritson, from the asbestos victims’ support group that covers South Yorkshire and north Nottinghamshire, said demand for its services was going up, yet every year it struggled to get funding. It saw 117 clients in 2011-12, and 298 in 2017-18. It saw 192 people up to May this year.

Ritson said the reactions of her clients to the news that they had mesothelioma varied. “For some people it hits them like a bolt out of the blue and they find it really difficult to understand that what they did as a young man in their 20s or while doing their apprenticeships is now ruining the retirement that they worked towards all their lives,” she said.

“But others tend to know it’s coming because they’ve seen a lot of their colleagues die from asbestos-related disease. For a lot of them it’s like a ticking clock and they don’t know whether it’s going to hit them or not.”

A spokesperson for the Department for Work and Pensions said: “Since the dangers of asbestos became clear, governments have, over many years, brought in regulations and legislation. Asbestos is banned in construction and the risks of exposure today are extremely low.”

It added that it took its responsibility to compensate people with mesothelioma very seriously, automatically awarding the maximum rate of industrial injuries disablement benefit and awarding lump sum compensation of up to £92,000, depending on a person’s age.

‘Just because it is banned doesn’t mean it’s gone’

Mavis Nye, 78, was diagnosed with cancer in 2009, more than 50 years after being exposed to asbestos dust on her husband’s overalls from his work as an apprentice at Chatham dockyard in Kent.

“He used to come home with it all in his hair and on his clothes,” she said. “It was just dust to me. So you’d shake it off and you put it in the washing machine and that’s it.”

Nye is one of thousands of people every year to be diagnosed with mesothelioma.

“When they first tell you you have mesothelioma you can’t even say the word so it doesn’t register,” said Nye. Writing on the website for the charity [Mesothelioma UK](#), Nye’s husband, Ray, said: “How do I feel about the fact that it was me who has given her this sentence? Gutted, destroyed, sick and, yes, guilty.”

‘Pain is part and parcel of everyday life for me’



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John Chapman at home in Darlington, County Durham. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

In 2015, John Chapman was preparing for the Mallorca 312, the longest amateur cycling event in Europe. He had been cycling about 6,000 miles a year and so put the fatigue he'd been starting to experience down to too much exercise and not enough recovery time.

During an appointment with a lung specialist, he was asked if he had had any past exposure to asbestos. "I said I had. In my early days I'd spent 10 years working in a foundry," said Chapman.

He was diagnosed with mesothelioma when he was 54. Now, aged 57, he has outlived many expectations. "It's like being committed to a death row sentence in that you know there is going to be a point in time after which you are not going to get past, based on statistics and life expectancies," he said. "That's the nature of the beast."

He now has only a fifth of his lung capacity in his left lung and a bone tumour the size of an Easter egg. "Pain is unfortunately part and parcel of everyday life for me," he said. "I have a Macmillan nurse who comes out and sees me and we are constantly adjusting and amending pain medications to try and offset the pain you get."

While Chapman and Nye are angry that they were exposed to the substance when there was already evidence it was dangerous, both are primarily concerned with the fact that asbestos is still all around us.

"Just because it is banned doesn't mean it's gone," says Nye. "It hasn't. It's everywhere. It's in buildings that are forever being pulled down and refurbished, which can make it airborne ... We need to educate the young because they think it's a problem of the past."

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