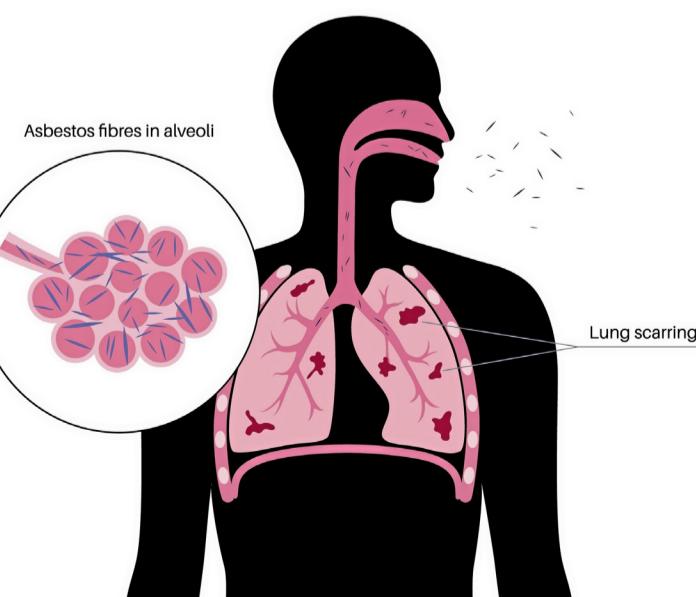




Asbestos continues to be the island's biggest workplace killer

Andrew Mills, GOSHA chairman, explains about the dangers of asbestos and what we can do to manage the problem



IT WAS banned from new use in Guernsey from 1999 and yet 25 years later it remains such a problem for our island (and the UK and elsewhere too, of course).

It has wonderful fire retardant properties and was used quite widely as a result, particularly in the construction industry, of course.

It is found in most Guernsey buildings constructed or altered before the ban. In fact, we had our ban around two years after it was banned in the UK and its use became even more prevalent in that period when a lot of UK banned products were sent to Guernsey for use here.

Asbestos is safe so long as it is not disturbed and its fibres are not released. But it is easily disturbed and its fibres are easily released into the atmosphere we breathe. The tiny fibres, which are too small for us to see, can easily reach our lungs and it is in our lung walls, in particular, that they lodge. Our bodies just can't deal with them and they can cause scarring and cancer. The most common conditions are mesothelioma and asbestosis.

Once diagnosed, you normally have about six months to live. If you are a smoker, your vulnerability increases, many times.

Conditions can take between about eight to over 40 years to become apparent and it is this lag which seems to make some people rather complacent and dismissive of the dangers. But a death from exposure to asbestos is distressing, for the individual and their family and friends. People should not be complacent nor dismissive.

I have known a number of people

who have been diagnosed. Sadly, none are still alive. They include builders, a dock worker, caretakers, an aircraft engineer (asbestos was used in aircraft braking systems) and the managing director of a Guernsey office-based business who was exposed to asbestos fibres in a building in which he worked.

One of the caretakers died because he used to sweep up dust in the building in which he worked. Unknown to him, the dust contained asbestos fibres and he used a vacuum cleaner to sweep up the dust. The asbestos fibres are so small they are not caught by a standard vacuum cleaner's filter. They pass through and are exhaled into the surrounding atmosphere and were breathed in by the caretaker. He died within six months of diagnosis and left a wife and three teenage children. It was very distressing.

To help us all in Guernsey, we have an Asbestos Approved Code of Practice (ACoP). It is part of our law and must be followed by all businesses, charities and other organisations in Guernsey. It tells us about asbestos and how it should be managed, who should assess it

and remove it, that it's presence should be recorded for building users, especially contractors, and so on. You will find it at www.gov.gg/asbestos

You will come across asbestos in many places in Guernsey. It can kill you but not if you are wise to it. Know where it is – all businesses and other organisation premises in Guernsey must know where it is or suspected to be. If it is not present, that should be recorded too. These facts must be recorded in an asbestos management plan (see the above mentioned website) and made available to those needing to see it, especially contractors and service providers, of course.

Asbestos will continue to be a problem for as long as it is in our buildings – that is likely to be many years to come. But if we understand the problem and manage it properly, we can avoid its adverse effects. The key is to be well informed, proactive and organised and follow the sensible provisions of Guernsey's Asbestos ACoP.

Let's reduce the number of asbestos induced deaths in Guernsey by knowing the potential hazards and by taking sensible precautions.

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