

Asbestos Exposure: Important Information for Firefighters

Firefighters clearly face an array of occupational hazards, including the risk of falling when climbing tall ladders or the potential for burns while fighting a raging fire. The risk of exposure to asbestos, however, is an equally dangerous hazard for firefighters that we may not consider. Previous exposure to asbestos has been linked to the development of [pleural mesothelioma](#), a fatal type of cancer that has no cure.

Asbestos may be found in millions of U.S. residences, commercial buildings, schools, and even automobiles. If a structure was completed before 1980, it is safe to assume that it contains asbestos in the form of attic insulation, drywall compound, plaster, roofing tiles, and floor and ceiling tiles. If asbestos-containing products are damaged by fire, tiny asbestos fibers can become airborne, putting firefighters at risk of inhalation.

Why is asbestos such a dangerous toxin? If inhaled, the fibers can situate in the pleural lining of the lungs for decades before an individual may begin to suffer from mesothelioma symptoms, such as difficulty breathing and lingering cough. A diagnosis of mesothelioma cancer (also referred to as [asbestos cancer](#)) is essentially a death sentence: the survival rate for mesothelioma sufferers is about 1%, and the majority of patients will surrender to this especially aggressive type of cancer in less than 2 years following their initial diagnosis.

It is imperative that firefighters understand how to protect themselves from the devastating health consequences of asbestos exposure, as they are considered to be at a heightened risk of developing mesothelioma. Wearing appropriate safety gear, including an approved self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) and with protective outerwear will significantly decrease a firefighter's chances of inhalation. However, it is equally as important that firefighters remove and clean their safety gear prior to leaving the scene of a fire to prevent the transfer of asbestos fibers from one location to another, as instances of [mesothelioma](#) as a result of secondhand asbestos exposure have risen in recent years.

The Mesothelioma & Asbestos Awareness Center features important information related to firefighter safety and asbestos exposure. Please visit the MAA Center website for further information.