

One of the confounding characteristics of asbestos disease is the latency period. A latency period of a disease is the time between the exposure to the disease-causing substance and the actual manifestation of the disease. In asbestos-related diseases, the latency period is exceptionally long, typically measured in decades.

The typical latency period for mesothelioma is between 20 to 50 years, though it can be even longer in some cases. This means that somebody who was exposed to asbestos in the 1950s or 1960s may be disease free for many years, but could be diagnosed with mesothelioma today as a direct result of the exposure to asbestos those many years ago.

The latency period of mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases also means that somebody who is first exposed to asbestos today is not considered to be at risk of developing an asbestos-related disease in the immediate future, but is at an increased risk of developing such a disease many years from now. Unfortunately, there is no way to predict whether or not that person will in fact ever be diagnosed with an asbestos-related disease. Asbestos-related diseases are considered dose-responsive, so that avoiding further exposures to asbestos is always advised, to avoid further increasing the risk of developing disease in the future.

Because asbestos use in the United States reached a peak in the 1970s, it is believed by the scientific and medical community that asbestos diseases such as mesothelioma and lung cancer will continue to be a problem for American workers during the next decades.