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Silicosis: Risk and Detection

Silicosis is a disabling, nonreversible and sometimes fatal lung disease caused by overexposure to respirable crystalline silica. Silica is the second most common mineral in the earth's crust and is a major component of sand, rock, and mineral ores. Overexposure to dust that contains microscopic particles of crystalline silica can cause scar tissue to form in the lungs, which reduces the lungs' ability to extract oxygen from the air we breathe.

More than 1 million U.S. workers are exposed to crystalline silica. Each year, more than 250 American workers die with silicosis. There is no cure for the disease, but it is 100 percent preventable if employers, workers, and health professionals work together to reduce exposures. In addition to silicosis, inhalation of crystalline silica particles has been associated with other diseases, such as bronchitis and tuberculosis. Some studies also indicate an association with lung cancer.

Who Is At Risk?

Working in any dusty environment where crystalline silica is present potentially can increase a person's chances of getting silicosis. If a number of workers are working in a dusty environment and one is diagnosed with the silicosis, the others should be examined to see if they might also be developing silicosis. Some examples of the industries and activities that pose the greatest potential risk for worker exposure include:

- Construction (sandblasting, rock drilling, masonry work, jack hammering, tunneling)
- Stone cutting (sawing, abrasive blasting, chipping, grinding)
- Glass manufacturing
- Mining (cutting or drilling through sandstone or granite)
- Agriculture (dusty conditions from disturbing the soil, such as plowing and harvesting)
- Foundry work (grindings, moldings, shakeout, core room)
- Shipbuilding (abrasive blasting)
- Ceramics, clay, and pottery
- Railroad (setting and laying track)
- Manufacturing of soaps and detergents
- Manufacturing and use of abrasives

More than 100,000 workers in the United States encounter high-risk, silica exposures through sandblasting, rock drilling, and mining. Workers who remove paint and rust from buildings, bridges, tanks, and other surfaces; clean foundry castings; work with stone or clay; etch or frost glass; and work in construction are at risk of overexposure to crystalline silica. **Detection**

A medical examination that includes a complete work history and a chest X-ray and lung function test is the only sure way to determine if a person has silicosis. Workers who believe they are overexposed to silica dust should visit a doctor who knows about lung diseases. That being said, there are a number of symptoms that people who work around silica dust should watch out for:

- Frequent and severe coughing
- Chest pains
- Unusual shortness of breath following physical exertion
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue If you are employed in a job that requires even moderate exposure to silica dust, be sure to undergo frequent medical examinations even if no symptoms of silicosis exist. Early detection is the best defense against this

disease.

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