



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

# UPDATE ON MESOTHELIOMA

A diagnosis of mesothelioma can leave you and your loved ones feeling uncertain, anxious and overwhelmed. There are important treatment decisions to make, emotional concerns to manage, and insurance and financial paperwork to organize, among other practical concerns.

It is helpful to keep in mind that there are many sources of information and support for people coping with mesothelioma. By learning about this diagnosis and its treatment options, communicating with your health care team, and surrounding yourself with a support network, you will be better able to manage mesothelioma and experience a better quality of life.

## WHAT IS MESOTHELIOMA?

**Mesothelioma is a rare cancer; it is possible you never even heard the word “mesothelioma” until speaking with your health care team about symptoms you or a loved one are experiencing. This type of cancer affects mesothelium, the tissue lining the lungs, heart and other organs.**

Approximately 75% of mesotheliomas begin in the lining surrounding the lungs. This type is called pleural malignant mesothelioma. Mesothelioma that begins in the tissue surrounding the abdominal area, called peritoneal mesothelioma, accounts for about 10% to 20% of mesotheliomas. It is estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 people are diagnosed with mesothelioma each year in the United States.

## WHAT CAUSES MESOTHELIOMA?

**Approximately 70% to 80% of people diagnosed with mesothelioma have been exposed to asbestos.** Asbestos is a group of natural minerals found in the earth. It was once commonly added to cement, insulation, roof shingles and other products. People involved in making, installing or maintaining products containing asbestos can breathe in dangerous asbestos fibers. These fibers can also be carried in asbestos dust on clothing, exposing family members of workers to potentially high levels of asbestos.

Older homes and buildings may contain asbestos. In many cases, breaking up asbestos may cause fibers to become airborne, where they can be inhaled. Do not attempt to remove asbestos from your home—hire an expert. The Environmental Protection Agency offers advice on its website for dealing with asbestos in the home at [www.epa.gov/asbestos](http://www.epa.gov/asbestos).

## HOW IS MESOTHELIOMA DIAGNOSED?

**It can be challenging to diagnose mesothelioma, as its symptoms can be similar to other illnesses, such as lung cancer.** Many people first notice symptoms when they develop fluid in the space around the lungs, a condition called pleural effusion, or in the abdomen, called ascites. When this fluid is removed, it can be analyzed to find out if there are cancer cells in it.

If mesothelioma is suspected, the doctor will remove a small amount of tissue for examination, a process called a biopsy. Sometimes, a needle can be used to get a sample of the lining. More often, the doctor removes a tissue sample by using a thin tube inserted through a small incision in the body. This is called a video thoracoscopy when used to get samples from inside the chest, or a laparoscopy when used to get tissue samples from inside the abdomen.

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## WHAT ARE TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR MESOTHELIOMA?

**There are three standard treatment options for mesothelioma: surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy.**

Surgery is an option for people whose mesothelioma is contained around the lungs or abdomen. The extent of surgery depends on how much the mesothelioma has spread. Even if the doctor removes all the cancer that can be seen at the time of the surgery, some patients may be given chemotherapy or radiation therapy after surgery to destroy any remaining cancer cells.

Radiation therapy uses high-energy x-rays or other types of radiation to destroy cancer cells or keep them from growing. External radiation therapy uses a machine outside the body to send radiation toward the cancer. Internal radiation therapy uses a radioactive substance that is placed directly into or near the cancer. The way radiation therapy is given depends on the type and stage of mesothelioma.

Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment that uses drugs to stop the growth of cancer cells by destroying them or stopping them from dividing. When chemotherapy is taken by mouth or injected into the body through a vein or muscle, the drugs enter the bloodstream to reach cancer cells throughout the body. When chemotherapy is placed directly into the body, the drugs mainly

affect cancer cells in those areas. The standard chemotherapy option for mesothelioma is Pemetrexed (Alimta), which is often given in combination with another drug (cisplatin or carboplatin, for example).

## WILL THERE BE MORE TREATMENTS IN THE FUTURE?

**Clinical trials help doctors better understand cancer and ways to reduce its symptoms and treatment side effects.** People in clinical trials are among the first to receive new treatments. They are also closely monitored by doctors and other researchers.

Because mesothelioma is a less common diagnosis than other cancers, there may be fewer clinical trials to choose from at any given time. To learn more about clinical trials, speak with your doctor. You can also find listings of clinical trials through resources such as the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service (800-4-CANCER or [www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials](http://www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials)) or the American Cancer Society's Clinical Trials Matching Service (800-303-5691 or <https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/results?term=mesothelioma&Search=Search>).

To learn more about mesothelioma and treatment options, contact the Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation ([curemeso.org](http://curemeso.org)).

## CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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