



**Approved Talking Points and Questions and Answers on
Asbestos Exposure, Vermiculite
and
ATSDR's Role in the
Libby (MT) Community Environmental Health Project**

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Approved ATSDR Talking Points

Libby, Montana

Background and overview of ATSDR involvement

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has received and is acting on a request for assistance from Senator Baucus regarding human health concerns related to possible exposure to asbestos in the Libby, Montana, area.

ATSDR is the principal federal public health agency of the Department of Health and Human Services involved with hazardous waste issues, and is responsible for preventing or reducing the harmful effects of exposure to hazardous substances *in the environment* on public health.

In response to the Senator's request, ATSDR was asked to evaluate human health concerns in Libby that may be related to asbestos.

Several public health actions for this site are being developed in collaboration with EPA and state and local officials:

- C Conduct a medical testing program for people who lived or worked in the Libby [area](#) during the time of highest exposure.
- C Advise EPA on environmental sampling to develop a better understanding of patterns of exposure.
- € Collect and analyze medical and epidemiologic information to understand the nature and extent of asbestos-related disease in the community.
- C Work with other involved agencies to recommend actions that can be taken to limit further exposure to asbestos and to mitigate or prevent adverse health effects.
- C Provide residents complete and current information on asbestos-related health risks. Work with area physicians and other medical professionals to help them obtain up-to-date information on the diagnosis and treatment of asbestos-related diseases.

Libby Community Environmental Health Project

Phrase approved to describe all public health activities to be conducted in the Libby area related to asbestos exposure.

Agencies participating at Libby

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Montana Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), the Lincoln County Environmental Health Department (LCEHD), and Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

Planned medical testing program

The planned medical testing program is a joint effort of ATSDR and EPA designed to identify and examine people whose health may have been affected from having been exposed to asbestos in and near Libby, Montana. The program will evaluate program participants' current health status.

Details of the testing program were provided to the public on March 23 and 24 at public availability sessions in the Libby area. Continued public communications on the testing are underway.

The testing program is currently scheduled to begin with phone calls to residents in the Libby area beginning [April 25 \(new date\)](#). In these calls residents will be asked a few questions [to determine their eligibility to participate](#).

Persons living outside the Libby area but who want to participate can also call the toll free number beginning [April 25](#) to determine their eligibility: **[1-800-439-8308 \(revised\)](#)**.

The public has been invited to comment on the medical testing protocol. Full copies of the protocol were made available at the ATSDR public availability sessions on March 23 and 24 in Libby, and at the EPA and ATSDR Information Centers. Copies can also be obtained by calling ATSDR toll-free at 1-888-42-ATSDR (1-888-422-8737). Written comments may be sent to: ATSDR, 1600 Clifton Road, ATTN: Dan Middleton, Mail Stop E-31, Atlanta, GA [30333](#). Comments must be received by ATSDR before close of business on April 18, 2000.

If comments are made by the public during the planned review of the testing protocol that require major changes in the testing program, the planned dates of providing the testing may be adjusted.

Eligibility for testing

Persons eligible for testing will include (1) former employees of W.R. Grace/Zonolite in the Libby area and household members of former employees, and 2) Persons who have lived, worked, or attended school in the Libby area [for at least 6 months](#) on or before December 31, 1990.

Those persons living outside the Libby area who believe they meet the testing criteria, will be allowed to participate in the testing program at their own travel expense (testing is free); however, they must call [1-800-439-8308](tel:1-800-439-8308) to confirm their eligibility and make an appointment for testing.

Planned components of testing

Eligible participants will receive an appointment to come in for 1) a short face-to-face interview, 2) chest x-rays, and 3) a lung function test.

Chest x-rays cannot detect asbestos in the lungs, but they are the most reliable way to identify changes in the lungs and lining of the lungs that might be the result of asbestos exposure.

A pulmonary function test, also known as a lung [function](#) test, measures air flow in and out of the lungs to see how the lungs are performing. The test is conducted by having the participant blow air rapidly [and forcefully](#) into a mouthpiece of a pulmonary function machine.

After the testing, a nurse or medical representative will answer any questions the participants have before they leave the testing area.

Results of testing

Participants will be notified of the [interview results, breathing test, and initial x-ray results via letter at the end of the project.](#)

The x-ray films will be reviewed first by a local radiologist and then by three independent radiologic experts (not from Libby) . A letter explaining the x-ray results will be sent to each participant at their home address. The films and a copy of the results letter will be forwarded to the doctor specified by the participant.

If a participant is confirmed to have symptoms consistent with asbestos-related lung problems, the participant will be referred to a physician (the participant's personal physician or another qualified physician).

Participants who have no current lung problems or symptoms will be instructed to contact their personal physicians if they develop breathing problems in the future.

March ATSDR public availability sessions and public information activities

Components of the proposed medical testing program were discussed in ATSDR public availability sessions on Thursday, March 23, 2000, from 2:30 to 7:00 p.m. at the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) hall, 108 W. 2nd Street, Libby; on Friday, March 24, 2000, from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. at Troy High School, 105 E. Missoula Street, Troy; and on Saturday, March 25 at the Lincoln County Health Fair.

Since March 17, ATSDR has staffed an office in Libby at 418 Mineral Avenue, phone 406-293-7781, ext. 279. (Calls from the Montana-area public on ATSDR activities at Libby should be referred to this office.)

A variety of other public communications about the testing are planned (including ads, and public service announcements).

Questions and Answers

Exposure to Asbestos

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral found in soil and rock in some areas of the United States. The six types of asbestos are: actinolite, amosite, anthophyllite, chrysotile, crocidolite, and tremolite. Asbestos fibers are found in different sizes and shapes. (The type of asbestos found in the vermiculite ore from the mine at Libby is tremolite/actinolite.)

How would I come into contact with (be exposed to) asbestos?

Inhalation of asbestos fibers is the method of exposure that is most likely to cause adverse health effects for people. Workers in industries that use asbestos or asbestos-containing products, such as building materials, likely inhale the fibers and may carry asbestos fibers home on their clothes, where family members would come into contact with asbestos by inhaling the fibers. Also, people who live or work near asbestos-related operations may inhale asbestos fibers that enter the air because of releases of materials into the environment. Generally, asbestos fibers are long, thin and so small they cannot be seen and, as they float in the air, they can easily be inhaled. People may also swallow asbestos if they eat in areas where there are asbestos fibers in the air or drink water contaminated with fibers. Homes and businesses insulated with asbestos may also be a source of exposure.

The amount of asbestos a person is exposed to will vary according to how many fibers are in the air and how long a person breathes the air containing asbestos fibers.

Between 1940 and 1980, an estimated 27 million Americans workers had an occupational exposure to asbestos that could result in health effects.

Does asbestos exposure cause health problems?

Some people exposed to asbestos have health problems because of the asbestos. After asbestos fibers are breathed in, because of their natural shape and size they can easily enter and become trapped in the airways and lung tissue and the body has difficulty removing the fibers. Continued exposure to asbestos increases the amount of asbestos that remains in the lungs. Diseases related to asbestos may not show up until several years later.

What illnesses are associated with asbestos exposure?

C Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a serious, progressive, long-term disease of the lungs. It is not cancer. It is caused by inhaling asbestos fibers that irritate lung tissues and cause the tissues to scar. The scarring makes it hard for lungs to do their job getting oxygen into the blood. Symptoms of asbestosis include shortness of breath and a dry crackling sound in the lungs while inhaling. The chance of getting asbestosis is very small for those who do not work with asbestos. There is no effective treatment for asbestosis, however, symptoms of the disease can be managed under the care of a physician. The disease, if severe, can cause disability and death.

C Cancers

Lung Cancer

Lung cancer causes the largest number of deaths related to asbestos exposure. People who work in occupations involving the mining, milling, manufacturing, and use of asbestos and its products are more likely to get lung cancer than the general population. The most common symptoms of lung cancer are coughing and a change in breathing. Other symptoms include shortness of breath, persistent chest pain, hoarseness, and anemia. People who develop these symptoms do not necessarily have lung cancer but should consult a physician for advice. People who have been exposed to asbestos and are also exposed to some other cancer-causing product, such as cigarette smoke, have a greater risk of developing lung cancer than people who have been exposed only to asbestos.

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a relatively rare form of cancer that is found in the thin lining (membrane) of the lungs, chest, abdomen, and heart. Several hundred cases are diagnosed each year in the United States, and most cases are linked with exposure to asbestos. About 2 percent of all miners and textile workers who work with asbestos, and 10 percent of all workers who were involved in the manufacture of asbestos-containing gas masks, develop mesothelioma. This disease may not show up until many years (generally 20-40+) after asbestos exposure.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to asbestos?

Chest x-rays cannot show asbestos fibers, but can find early signs of lung disease. Other tests, such as lung function tests and high resolution CAT scans, can also detect changes in the lungs caused by asbestos. These changes usually are not detectable until years after exposure.

What treatments are available for asbestos-related diseases?

The National Cancer Institute indicates that the key to successful treatment of asbestos-related diseases **lies in early detection.**

Many of the health problems caused by asbestosis are due in large part to lung infections, like pneumonia, that attack weakened lung. Early medical attention and prompt, aggressive treatment offer the best chance of success in controlling such infections. Depending on the situation, doctors may give a vaccine against influenza or pneumococcal pneumonia as a protective measure.

Treatment of cancer is tailored to the individual patient and may include surgery, anticancer drugs, radiation, or combinations of these therapies. Information about cancer treatment is available from the National Cancer Institute-supported Cancer Information Service, whose toll free number is 1-800-4-CANCER.

(If caller may be eligible for the Libby medical testing, refer him/her to the information number for Libby medical testing to be activated April 25: 1-800-439-8308.)

Questions and Answers

Exposure to Asbestos in Insulation

Q. How do I know if my insulation contains asbestos?

A. The only sure way to know is to have insulation samples collected by a state-certified inspector and then analyzed by a state-certified testing laboratory.

Q. Is my family at risk of exposure to asbestos if we have renovated and removed/disturbed the asbestos insulation?

A. Asbestos fibers are microscopic. These tiny fibers can be present in the dust in an area where asbestos insulation is disturbed. If you observed a lot of dust when removing/disturbing asbestos it is possible that you inhaled some asbestos fibers. Usually, however, it takes more exposure than a few trips to the attic to develop the health problems associated with exposure to asbestos.

If you are concerned about possible exposure, consult a physician who specializes in environmental or occupational medicine. It usually takes many years after an exposure for symptoms to develop; however, you should see a doctor if you notice any change in your breathing ability or develop problems breathing.

Q. I need to have asbestos insulation removed, what should I do?

A. There are specialized firms that are certified in removing asbestos safely. You may be able to locate these firms through your state, county, or local health department.

If you think you have asbestos insulation, do not attempt to remove it yourself.

Q. Am I at risk if I have personally removed/handled asbestos insulation?

A. If removing or handling the asbestos created a lot of dust, the dust may have contained tiny asbestos fibers. You could have inhaled some of those fibers.

Exposure to asbestos puts you at risk for lung diseases; that risk may be made worse by activities such as smoking. Although some people have developed severe illnesses from short-term or limited exposures, in general the greater the exposure to asbestos the greater the chance of developing health effects.

If you are concerned that you may have been exposed to asbestos, you may consider

visiting a physician experienced in identifying and treating asbestos exposure, such as a physician specializing in occupational and environmental medicine.

Q. I have insulation in my attic. Will it harm me to go into the attic?

A. If the insulation does not contain asbestos, then there is no threat of harm from asbestos-related illnesses from exposure to it. However, many types of insulation can be irritating to the skin, nose, throat, and lungs.

Even if it contains asbestos, the insulation may not be a problem if it is in good condition. For asbestos to present a problem for the homeowner, it must be disturbed so that tiny fibers are released into the air and inhaled or ingested.

Just going into the attic without disturbing a lot of dust will probably not harm you.

Q. Should I leave asbestos-containing insulation in my attic?

A. If the asbestos insulation is not fraying or breaking down and producing a lot of dust (containing free fibers), then it can remain. Asbestos insulation in good condition, left undisturbed, will not harm you.

If the insulation is producing dust, it would be wise to cover it with sheets of plastic and/or plywood. Plastic alone would be OK if you don't go into the attic often; the plywood, with its seams caulked, installed over the plastic would be better if you spend significant time there.

In the long term, it would be better for a professional to replace old asbestos insulation with more modern insulation. However, containment of the asbestos with properly installed plastic and wood is an option to delay that expense.

Some states may require that, when you sell your home, you inform the new homeowner of the asbestos in the house.

Q. I have insulation that's quite old (more than 15 years). Is it possible that the asbestos in it could still pose a health problem?

A. Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral fiber and it is unlikely to break down over time under the kinds of conditions found in a home. If there was asbestos in the insulation when it was installed, it is still there.

In fact, as the insulation gets older, it may deteriorate through normal wear and tear into the kind of tiny airborne fibers that are of concern. If this is the case, you may want to consider containment options.

If the insulation is producing dust, it would be wise to cover it with sheets of plastic

and/or plywood. Plastic alone would be OK if you don't go into the attic often; the plywood, with its seams caulked, installed over the plastic would be better if you spend significant time there. In the long term, it would be better for a professional to replace old asbestos insulation with more modern insulation. However, containment of the asbestos with properly installed plastic and wood is an option to delay that expense.

If you think that fibers from your attic may be getting into your living space, then you may want to consult an asbestos expert to have it evaluated and perhaps removed. You may be able to find a qualified asbestos removal contractor by contacting a regional or state industrial or homeowners contractors association or your local, county or state public health office.

Q. I have handled rolls of insulation for years. Am I at risk for exposure?

A. Not all insulation is made from asbestos; insulation may be made out of fiberglass or other materials. You should first determine whether the insulation that you handled contains asbestos.

Handling rolls of insulation containing asbestos increases the chance that you have been exposed to harmful fibers.

Whether that exposure is likely to cause harmful health effects is unique to you as an individual. Each person's response to exposure differs and may be based upon their unique genetic makeup and certain lifestyle activities, particularly smoking.

If you suspect that you have been exposed to asbestos fibers, especially if you think the exposure was long-term, you should consult a physician experienced in occupational and environmental medicine.

Questions and Answers

Exposure to Asbestos in Sources Other than Insulation

Q. Am I at risk for exposure to asbestos if I cut or drive nails through asbestos shingles or cut asbestos tiles?

A. Some but not all shingles and tiles contain asbestos. It is important to verify whether your materials contain asbestos.

Driving nails into or cutting shingles and tiles could be a problem if doing so causes airborne dust to be released. Asbestos must be in the form of free fibers and usually must be inhaled over a period of time to result in harmful health effects.

Sanding or sawing tiles or shingles that contain asbestos would create dust that could be hazardous if inhaled.

Asbestos tiles and shingles, through weathering, can release asbestos fibers. However, assuming that the shingles and tiles are outside the home, it is unlikely that asbestos exposure will present a problem. The manufacturing process that is used to make the shingles - or, for that matter, some tiles used in home sidings in the 40's and 50's - keeps asbestos fibers from being released.

Q. What are the harmful health effects from exposure to asbestos?

A. It usually takes exposure to high concentrations, such as you might find in an asbestos mining or processing facility, to cause harmful health effects. Asbestos levels detected in homes are less likely to cause health effects.

These effects include:

- asbestosis, which is a build-up of scar-like tissue in the lungs (asbestosis) and in the membrane that surrounds the lungs, and
- two types of cancer – lung cancer and a mesothelioma, a cancer of the membrane that surrounds the lungs.

People who are exposed to lower levels of asbestos may also have an increased risk of developing cancer, but the risk is usually small.

Questions and Answers

Vermiculite

Q. What is vermiculite?

A. Vermiculite, a naturally occurring mineral found in the ground, has some unique properties which make it suitable for use in insulation in homes. It is commonly used in indoor and outdoor gardening products such as potting soil and fertilizer. Vermiculite has been mined from several locations in the United States and overseas. The vermiculite mined from Libby was contaminated with asbestos. The EPA is currently investigating this potential problem.

Q. Are there harmful health effects from vermiculite?

A. Vermiculite alone should not cause harmful health effects. However, as with any particulate matter, breathing in large amounts of particles can cause irritation to the nose and throat. Some vermiculite contains asbestos as an impurity. For the asbestos to cause harmful health effects, it must exist as tiny free fibers that could be inhaled or ingested.

Q. If I have vermiculite, how should I handle it, dispose of it, to ensure I am safe?

A. Not all vermiculite contains asbestos. However, it is best not to inhale any dusty materials, or allow children to play with materials, such as vermiculite, that may create dust.

If you have vermiculite in your home, in the insulation, for instance, and you are concerned, you can have it tested to determine if it contains asbestos.

If testing indicates that the vermiculite in the structure of your home contains asbestos and you want it removed, you should hire a qualified professional to do so. Be sure that the contractor you hire is certified to work with asbestos-containing products, and plans to take precautions against generating a lot of dust in your living space.

At this time, there is little information to describe the adverse health effects from asbestos in vermiculite designed for home and garden use. Current regulations do not require that products (such as vermiculite) that may contain asbestos be labeled as such. Until more information becomes available regarding the health effects of asbestos in gardening products, we suggest you:

- Avoid generating any dust with the product.

- Not allow children to play with the product or in areas where the product is being mixed or used.
- Store the product in a sealed container.

For proper disposal of vermiculite, contact the environmental or waste management authorities in your community.

Q. How many vermiculite production facilities are in the United States and where are they located?

A. EPA is identifying and evaluating vermiculite facilities in the United States that recovered vermiculite ore from the W.R. Grace mine in Libby, Montana. W.R. Grace operated the Libby mine between 1963 and 1990. The mine produced ore that was contaminated with high levels of asbestos fibers, a naturally occurring mineral that comprised 0-25% of the net weight of the vermiculite ore at Libby. Exposure to vermiculite ore from Libby has been associated with asbestos-related health problems.

EPA is using its authorities under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (commonly known as Superfund) to identify sites that may require cleanup. EPA Regional Offices expect to complete identifying sites by April 30, 2000, and complete a preliminary evaluation of the sites by June 30, 2000.

For more information about this project, call the Superfund Hotline at 1-800-424-9346 or 703-412-9810.