

Asbestos and shift work boost work-related cancer deaths to over 8,000 a year

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(Medical Xpress) -- Around 8,000 cancer deaths in Britain each year are linked to occupations - especially those where asbestos, diesel engine fumes or shift work is involved - a new study shows today. This equates to around 5 per cent of all cancer deaths in Britain.

The study, funded by the Health and Safety Executive and published in the [British Journal of Cancer](#), also found that just under half of these deaths were among male construction workers who are most likely to come into contact with [asbestos](#) as well as other important [carcinogens](#) such as [silica](#) and diesel engine exhaust.

Researchers used a list of work-related [cancer](#) causing substances identified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) to calculate the impact of work on cancer cases and deaths. And they found that around 13,600 new cancer cases are caused by risk factors related to work each year.

After asbestos, the main work-related risk factors were night shift-work – linked to around 1,960 female breast cancer cases, mineral oil from metal and printing industries – linked to around 1730 cases of bladder, lung and non-melanoma skin cancers, sun exposure – linked to around 1540 skin cancer cases, silica exposure – linked to 910 cancer cases and diesel engine exhaust – linked to 800 cases.³

And researchers warned that these estimates of cancer cases and deaths linked to occupation are likely to be conservative and could be even

higher as new work-related risk factors are identified or the understanding of potential risk factors becomes more definite.⁴

In addition there are now more cases of cancer than there were back in 2004.

Lead author Dr Lesley Rushton, an occupational epidemiologist based at Imperial College London, said: “This study gives us a clear insight into how the jobs people do affect their risk of cancer.

“We hope these findings will help develop ways of reducing health risks caused by exposure to carcinogens in the workplace.

“The cancer with the greatest number of cases and deaths linked to work is lung – a disease which is hard to detect early and has poor survival. Over 30 occupational exposures have been identified by IARC as definite or probable lung cancer causing substances.

“One of the best ways we can beat the disease is by preventing it in the first place. Smoking has the single biggest impact on lung cancer risk, but work-place risks are also having a significant effect.”

Asbestos remains the most important occupational risk factor. Even though it is no longer used in construction, maintenance on old buildings can still be a risk for workers today. And the number of asbestos-related cancers will continue to rise as they can take a long time to develop.

Researchers said that some of the [risk factors](#) had an effect on cancer beyond the workplace – for example, asbestos can be found in some households and diesel engine exhaust contributes to air pollution.

Sara Hiom, director of information at Cancer Research UK, said: “It’s very worrying to see so many people developing and dying from

occupation-related cancers. A large proportion of the deaths are a result of exposure to asbestos in past decades and improved safety measures should mean that in the next generation or so we will see this number tail off dramatically.

“The Health and Safety Executive has commissioned a review of the evidence on [shift work](#) and cancer – at the moment it’s still only classified as a probable cause of cancer. Once the review is complete in 2015, we will have a more definite understanding of the role it may play in influencing cancer risk.

“At this point, we expect the government and employers to take fast and appropriate action to minimise the risks faced by workers and Cancer Research UK will be watching this closely.

“Not smoking is the single most important thing that can reduce the likelihood of developing cancer - to put this in perspective, there are around 43,000 cancer deaths due to smoking in the UK each year. Maintaining a healthy weight, cutting back on alcohol and taking plenty of exercise can also have a big impact on reducing the risk of cancer.”

More information: Rushton, L et al., Occupation and cancer in Britain, *British Journal of Cancer* Supplement, (2012).

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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