

Wittenoom records the world's worst mesothelioma rate

July 6 2016, by Narelle Towie, Sciencenetwork Wa



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

WA's indigenous population has the highest rate of mesothelioma deaths in the world, with more than two-thirds of cases caused by asbestos mining in Wittenoom, researchers say.

Mesothelioma is one of the most aggressive and deadly types of cancer,

killing people within months of diagnosis by attacking the lining of the lungs or abdomen.

A University of Western Australia study found 67 per cent of mesothelioma cases in WA's Aboriginal [population](#) were a result of the mining of asbestos in the Pilbara town, compared with fewer than 25 per cent of cases in non-Aboriginals.

The disparity is not because of biological differences but rather because the [indigenous population](#) was predominantly exposed to crocidolite—also called blue asbestos and the most potent form, UWA epidemiologist Dr Peter Franklin says.

"Many of the Aboriginal cases worked in the dusty, lower-paid job of loading raw crocidolite for transport to the ports, more than 300km from the mine," Dr Franklin says.

"So as a proportion, Wittenoom affected them [Aboriginal people] much more than it did non-Aboriginal people."

The incidence rate—the number of cases relative to the population size—is much higher for Aboriginal people, Dr Franklin says.

"It puts them at the highest rate worldwide," he says.

Twice as deadly

The study showed members of WA's Aboriginal population die from mesothelioma at more than double the rate of people in the United Kingdom—which has the world's highest national average.

The UWA team compared all cases of the asbestos-related cancer recorded in the WA Mesothelioma Register from 1960 to the end of

2013.

Nearly 7000 people, mostly men, mined blue asbestos from Wittenoom Gorge from the 1930s to 1966.

More than 300 former workers and nearly 100 ex-residents of the town have died from malignant mesothelioma, according to Dr Franklin.

He says that the number could be even higher because people in remote areas may not have sought medical help.

Today, Wittenoom is a ghost town, closed down in 1966 because of health concerns and de-gazetted by the WA Government in 2007.

The landscape is littered with the microscopic [asbestos](#) fibres that, when inhaled, can pierce the lining of the lung, causing inflammation and releasing mutagens that promote tumour growth.

Dr Franklin warns that the number of Aboriginal cases may grow.

"The area around Wittenoom remains important to the Banyjima people, who continue to visit the gorge for swimming, fishing, cooking and cultural purposes," the study says.

This article first appeared on [ScienceNetwork Western Australia](#) a science news website based at Scitech.

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Wittenoom records the world's worst mesothelioma rate (2016, July 6) retrieved 8 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-07-wittenoom-world-worst-mesothelioma.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.