

ASBESTOS EXPOSURE ABOARD U.S. NAVY SHIPS:

SHORT- AND LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS

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Asbestos was widely used aboard U.S. Navy ships until the late 1980s for insulation, fireproofing, gaskets, brake linings, deck tiles, and numerous engineering spaces. Sailors in engineering, hull maintenance, boiler operations, and shipyard repair frequently encountered airborne asbestos fibers.

Exposure typically occurred when asbestos-containing insulation was disturbed, during maintenance, or through long-term background exposure in poorly ventilated compartments.

SHORT-TERM (ACUTE) EFFECTS

Asbestos itself does ****not**** cause immediate symptoms. There are no short-term effects such as coughing, burning, or irritation specifically caused by asbestos fibers.

However, sailors may have experienced:

- Short-term respiratory irritation from ****dust**** generated during maintenance (not the asbestos itself).
- Acute bronchitis from co-exposure to dust, smoke, or fuel vapors.

IMPORTANT: The harmful effects of asbestos nearly always appear ****years or decades after exposure****, not immediately.

LONG-TERM (CHRONIC) EFFECTS

Long-term asbestos exposure is associated with several well-documented diseases. These conditions may take ****10–40 years**** to develop after exposure.

1. Asbestosis

A chronic, progressive scarring of the lung tissue caused by heavy or repeated exposure to asbestos fibers.

Common symptoms:

- Shortness of breath

- Persistent dry cough
- Chest tightness
- Fatigue
- Clubbing of fingers (advanced cases)

2. Pleural Plaques & Pleural Thickening

Asbestos fibers embed within the pleura (lining around the lungs), causing:

- Pleural plaques (scar tissue)
- Diffuse pleural thickening

These conditions may restrict breathing and cause chronic discomfort.

3. Lung Cancer

Asbestos exposure significantly increases the risk of lung cancer. Smoking combined with asbestos exposure creates a ****multiplicative**** risk far higher than either risk factor alone.

Symptoms typically develop decades later:

- Chronic cough
- Hemoptysis (coughing up blood)
- Weight loss
- Chest pain

4. Mesothelioma

A rare but aggressive cancer of the pleura or peritoneum. Asbestos exposure is the ****primary cause****.

Symptoms may include:

- Chest or abdominal pain
- Fluid buildup around the lungs
- Shortness of breath

- Fatigue
- Significant weight loss

5. COPD and Chronic Respiratory Issues

While asbestos does not directly cause COPD, long-term co-exposure to:

- Shipboard fumes
- Fuel vapors
- Dust
- Secondhand tobacco smoke

may worsen chronic breathing issues.

MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL ROLES WITH GREATEST RISK

- Boiler Technicians (BT)
- Machinist's Mates (MM)
- Hull Maintenance Technicians (HT)
- Shipfitters
- Electrician's Mates (EM)
- Damage Controlmen (DC)
- Pipefitters and welders
- Shipyard workers
- Any sailor assigned to engineering spaces or berthing compartments with deteriorating insulation

The confined environment aboard Navy ships increased risk because asbestos fibers remained airborne longer with limited ventilation.

VA DISABILITY CLAIM WRITEUP EXAMPLE

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****Statement in Support of Claim: Asbestos Exposure Aboard U.S. Navy Ship****

I am submitting this statement in support of my claim for service■connected disability due to asbestos exposure during my active-duty service in the United States Navy.

From [YEAR] to [YEAR], I served aboard the USS [SHIP NAME] as a [RATE/MOS]. My duties placed me in engineering spaces and compartments that contained extensive asbestos insulation. I routinely worked around steam pipes, boilers, pumps, gaskets, valves, and insulation lagging that were wrapped in asbestos-containing material. Maintenance operations frequently disturbed this insulation, releasing visible dust into the air.

At that time, personal protective equipment such as respirators was not consistently provided or required. I was often in enclosed spaces with poor ventilation for long periods, which increased exposure to airborne asbestos fibers.

Since my separation from service, I have developed chronic respiratory symptoms, including persistent coughing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and reduced ability to perform physical activity. Medical evaluation revealed [PLEURAL PLAQUES / ASBESTOSIS / COPD / MESOTHELIOMA / OTHER], conditions consistent with long-term asbestos exposure.

Given the well-established use of asbestos aboard U.S. Navy vessels during my years of service, the nature of my duties, and the medical findings that match known asbestos-related disease patterns, I believe my condition is directly related to my military service. I respectfully request that the VA recognize this disability as service■connected.

Signed,

[Veteran Name]

[Date]