

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RISKS

# ACOUSTIC and DRYWALL TRADES



**A diagnostic toolkit for physicians  
and primary health providers.**

**Prevention information for workers.**

**Give pages 3 and 4 of this booklet to your doctor.**

**They give your doctor information about the health risks of your job.**

This booklet was prepared by the Ontario construction industry's Occupational Disease and Research Labour-Management Health and Safety Committee with assistance from the Infrastructure Health & Safety Association (IHSA), the Ontario Ministry of Labour (MOL), the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), and labour and employers in Ontario construction.

The information presented here is for general information only. It should not be regarded or relied upon as a definitive guide to health risks in the trade. This information is, to the best of our knowledge, current at the time of publication. For more information, contact IHSA.

## Tasks and possible hazards

Conventional pole sanding can generate high levels of dust, including respirable silica. Inhaling this dust is a health and safety hazard. Drywall dust has been associated with varying degrees of eye, nose, throat, and respiratory tract irritation. Over time, breathing the dust from drywall joint compounds may cause persistent throat and airway irritation, coughing, phlegm production, and breathing difficulties similar to asthma. When silica is present, you may also face an increased risk of silicosis and lung cancer.

Conventional pole sanding also places a lot of stress on your back, shoulders, arms, and wrist. This stress as well as the repetitive motion is a health and safety hazard.

### All tasks

- ▶ **Hazardous materials from industrial worksites** (coke ovens, refineries, chemical plants, refrigeration plants, factories, cement plants, pulp and paper mills, power plants)
- ▶ **Awkward postures and vibration** when using power tools and pole sanders
- ▶ **Hazardous noise** from power tools and pole sanders
- ▶ **Dust** on construction sites
- ▶ **Insulation fibres** from ceiling tiles and spray-on fireproofing

### Drywall sanding

- ▶ **Drywall dust** (talc, calcite, mica, gypsum, silica)
- ▶ **Noise and vibration** from power tools and electric sanders
- ▶ **Asbestos** in plaster, paint or texture
- ▶ **Lead** in older paint
- ▶ **Silica** in drywall

### Clean up

- ▶ **Drywall dust** (talc, calcite, mica, gypsum, silica)

### Using heaters

- ▶ **Carbon monoxide** from heaters and generators

## How to protect your health

- ▶ Ask your supervisor or employer for safe work **instructions** and training.
- ▶ Consult industrial clients on site-specific health and safety **procedures**.
- ▶ Use **sanders** with a **vacuum attachment** where possible to capture dust
- ▶ Ask about any hazardous materials or unknown chemicals when **entering** an industrial site for work.
- ▶ Ensure adequate **ventilation**. Use natural and mechanical ventilation to dilute airborne contaminants with outside air.
- ▶ Don't use gasoline-powered equipment **inside**.
- ▶ Never use compressed air to blow dust away or for cleanup. Instead, use **wet sweeping**.
- ▶ Wear a proper **respirator** when sanding and during clean-up operations.
- ▶ Wear gloves or use creams to protect the **skin**. Wear coveralls.
- ▶ Wear **hearing protection** when exposed to loud noise.
- ▶ Consult **safety data sheets** (SDSs) for information about hazardous chemicals used at work.
- ▶ Obey workplace health and safety **rules**.
- ▶ **Never eat, drink, smoke, or chew gum** in areas contaminated with asbestos, lead, or toxic chemicals.
- ▶ Wash or wipe **hands** clean before eating, drinking, and smoking.
- ▶ Never use **solvents** to wash hands.
- ▶ Always clean up and change out of contaminated **clothing** before going home at the end of the shift.
- ▶ Wash work clothes **separately** from casual and other family members' clothes.
- ▶ **Report** hazards to your employer.

Workers who are without symptoms and who have been exposed to asbestos may participate in a research study at Princess Margaret Hospital by volunteering to be screened for mesothelioma/asbestos.

Phone: 416-340-5686 • Fax: 416-340-4964

For more information about health and safety in your job, contact your union or

Infrastructure Health & Safety Association: 1-800-263-5024 • ihsa.ca  
Ontario Ministry of Labour: 1-877-202-0008 • labour.gov.on.ca  
Workplace Safety and Insurance Board: 1-800-387-5540 • wsib.on.ca



## Occupational diseases and hazardous agents encountered by acoustic and drywall trades

### Job function

Workers in these trades install and finish drywall sheets and various types of ceiling systems.

### Asbestos-related Diseases

- Asbestosis
- Cancer (lung, mesothelioma, gastrointestinal)—*asbestos*
- Asbestos warts—*asbestos*

### Cancer

- Lung—*asbestos, dust, environmental tobacco smoke, silica*
- Gastrointestinal—*asbestos*
- Stomach—*asbestos*

### Neurological

- Hand-arm vibration syndrome—*vibrating tools*
- Neuropathy, toxic—*lead*
- Parkinsonism—*carbon monoxide, manganese*

### Skin Disorders

- Dermatitis, allergic/contact—*drywall dust*

### Respiratory Diseases

- Asthma, occupational—*fungi/mould, dust, mineral fibres*
- Bronchitis, chronic—*drywall dust, environmental tobacco smoke*
- Hypersensitivity pneumonitis (HP), acute/chronic—*fungi/mould*
- Pulmonary edema—*silica*
- Silicosis—*silica* (see Scleroderma/Systemic sclerosis)

### Miscellaneous Disorders

- Infertility, male—*lead*
- Noise-induced hearing loss—*power tools, heavy machinery, grinders, industrial noise*
- Renal disease—*lead*
- Scleroderma/Systemic sclerosis—*silica*
- Celiac disease—*drywall materials contaminated with wheat and rye during the extraction process*  
(Contaminated drywall materials can enter the body through ingestion and the respiratory track.)

The next page provides important diagnostic criteria for screening, early detection, and diagnosis.

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For more info about occupational disease and workplace health and safety, contact the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board: 1-877-202-0008

## Asbestos disease

Asbestos-caused fibrosis of the lungs and pleura may lead to shortness of breath. It usually takes 15 or more years from the onset of exposure for radiographic abnormalities and symptoms to arise. Radiologists should be alerted to the suspected diagnosis. Drywallers occupationally exposed to asbestos are at increased risk of cancers of the lungs and pleura.

Screening for cancer has not been proven to reduce mortality; however, it can result in early detection. If there is any suspicion of asbestos-related illness (i.e., not screening scenario), patients may be referred directly to Princess Margaret Hospital's program where immediate assistance, rapid assessment, and specialized treatments are available.

Phone 1-877-LUNG 911 (5864 911) Fax 416-340-3353. Asbestos-exposed workers should be counselled about smoking cessation.

## Contact dermatitis

Contact dermatitis is an inflammatory skin reaction to direct contact with noxious agents in the environment. Substances that produce this condition after single or multiple exposures may be either irritant or allergic in nature.

Irritant contact dermatitis (ICD) results from contact with external agents that directly damage the epidermis, in contrast to allergic contact dermatitis (ACD) in which the damage occurs through the host's immune response as a result of a delayed type hypersensitivity reaction.

The diagnosis of contact dermatitis should be considered when there is a suspected workplace agent (allergen or irritant). Screening should include determination of the following:  
(A) Did the skin condition start after the worker started the job?  
OR Did the skin condition become worse after the worker started the job?  
AND (B) Are symptoms better on weekends or holidays off work?

Referral to a specialist with experience diagnosing and treating occupational contact dermatitis should be considered when any of the following are suspected:

- All cases of possible ACD
- ICD with allergic features
- Chronic ICD
- Complicated ICD (e.g., not improving, deteriorating, confounded by another skin disease such as psoriasis).

## Hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS) and vibration-induced white finger (VWF)

HAVS and VWF are the major health hazards related to the use of vibrating tools. If workers develop symptoms of tingling or numbness, or if their fingers occasionally become white, blue, or painful—especially when cold—they should be examined by a doctor who knows about the diagnosis and treatment of these conditions.

Diagnostic tests that can be used include plethysmography, arteriography, skin thermography, and sensory tests such as two-point discrimination depth sense, pinprick touch, and temperature sensation. The Occupational Medicine Clinic at St. Michael's hospital in Toronto has diagnostic facilities.

## Noise-induced hearing loss

Noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) is diagnosed by audiometric testing. With NIHL, there is a characteristic dip (notch) at 4 kHz on the audiogram. This contrasts with presbycusis where there is a continuous dropoff as frequency increases.

## Inhalation disease: Silicosis

Silicosis is an occupational lung disease caused by inhaling crystalline silica dust. Silica inflammation and scarring is manifested as nodular lesions in the upper lobes of the lungs.

Silicosis is progressive and signs may not appear until years after exposure has begun. Symptoms include:

- Dyspnea on exertion
- Dry cough
- Fatigue.

The diagnosis is made by radiographic examination. Because the finding may be subtle, the films should be interpreted by a radiologist with experience in occupational lung diseases.

## Occupational asthma

Sensitizer-induced occupational asthma is caused by an immune response to specific workplace agents such as low-molecular-weight chemicals (such as diisocyanates, colophony [a pine resin product used in soldering], or epoxy compounds). Once a person has been sensitized to one of these materials, even exposure to extremely low quantities will exacerbate the asthma. If this form of occupational asthma is suspected from the patient's history, objective investigation is required to confirm or refute the diagnosis.

Patients with confirmed sensitizer-induced occupational asthma should have no further exposure to the causative agent, since the best outcome is achieved with early diagnosis and complete avoidance of exposure. An objectively confirmed diagnosis is very important. Patients with suspected sensitizer-induced occupational asthma should be referred as soon as possible to a specialist (a respirologist, an allergist, or an occupational physician) with expertise in this area. Investigations are most helpful if they can be performed while the patient is still working in the suspected causative work area; the primary care physician may be able to initiate some of these.

*Source: Occupational asthma: An approach to diagnosis and management. Tarlo and Liss. Canadian Medical Association Journal. Apr 1, 2003. 168(7); 867-71.*

## Neurologic effects

**Acute toxic effect of solvents:** Organic solvents are volatile substances commonly used in the workplace as cleaners and degreasers. The systemic symptoms of acute solvent poisoning resemble those of intoxication from alcoholic beverages.

**Toxic Neuropathy:** Chemicals that can cause toxic polyneuropathy include lead and N-hexane. Most symmetrical, sensorimotor neuropathies caused by exposure to chemicals are indistinguishable from similar effects caused by systemic diseases such as diabetes or B12 deficiency. The diagnosis of toxic polyneuropathy is usually made on the basis of symptoms following exposure to the chemical and the resolution of symptoms months to years after cessation of exposure.

## Scleroderma

Scleroderma, sometimes called systemic sclerosis, is a type of connective tissue disorder. Diagnosis is recognized if the case is characterized by either:

- **Proximal scleroderma**—skin changes suggestive of scleroderma that appear near the finger and wrist joints as well as on other parts of the extremities, face, neck, or trunk of the body. These changes usually appear symmetrically on both sides of the body and include skin changes on fingers and toes.

OR two of the following:

- **Sclerodactyl**—skin changes suggestive of scleroderma that is limited to fingers and toes
- **Digital pitting** of fingertips or loss of substance from the finger pad—depressed areas at tips of digits or loss of pad tissue
- **Bilateral basilar pulmonary fibrosis**—x-ray evidence of a bilateral pattern of linear or linear-nodular densities in the lower lung that are not due to primary lung disease.