

Black Lung

Health Hazard Information Sheet 39

U.S. Department of Labor
Mine Safety and Health Administration



Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis (CWP) and other occupational lung diseases from coal mine dust are collectively known as "black lung." How quickly these diseases develop depends on the amount of respirable coal and quartz dust present in the mine atmosphere where miners work or travel and on the amount of time that miners spend working in such an environment. Recent reports by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) on coal miners' X-ray screening results revealed some disturbing facts:

- New cases of CWP continue to occur among our nation's underground miners, especially in younger miners.
- The number of miners with more than 20 years of mining experience who have been found to have CWP is on the rise.
- The most disabling and potentially fatal form of CWP is being observed in miners in their thirties.

MSHA prepared this information to assist miners and mine operators in fully understanding black lung. Use this information as a guide to **ACT NOW** and **END Black Lung**.

What You Should Know About Black Lung

- Occupational lung diseases are dust-related diseases that occur after an extended period of exposure to excessive amounts of respirable coal mine dust.
- Black lung includes:
 - *fibrotic diseases that damage or destroy lung tissue such as CWP or silicosis. Fibrotic diseases are usually seen on chest X-rays.*
 - *airflow diseases, referred to as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), block movement of air in and out of the lungs. Examples of COPD include emphysema and chronic bronchitis. The development or existence of COPD is determined by breathing tests.*
- Black lung leads to poor health, permanent disability, and death. Because black lung damages the lungs, it causes the heart to work much harder. As a result, a miner with black lung may die from respiratory failure or heart failure.
- Black lung affects young and old miners alike. NIOSH recently reported that black lung is not just an "old man's disease." The quality of life for a miner with black lung can be severely affected. It impacts the miner's entire family.

- Black lung can continue to progress to more complicated forms of lung disease even after the miner stops working.

What Are the Symptoms of Black Lung ?

- In the very early stages of the disease, a miner with black lung may experience no symptoms at all.
- As the disease advances over time, a miner with black lung may experience difficulty breathing when working or even walking.
- If the disease has advanced to the most severe and disabling form, a miner with black lung will experience shortness of breath, coughing and pain during breathing. It will ultimately result in permanent disability and possibly death.

How to Find Out If You Have Black Lung

- Get a chest X-ray:
 - *at the operator's expense at the time of hire and every 5 years thereafter under NIOSH-approved X-ray plan posted on the mine bulletin board.*
 - *through your personal physician.*
 - *when the NIOSH X-ray van arrives in your area or at your mine.*
- Visit your personal physician or any federally-funded black lung clinic if you experience the symptoms listed above. They may provide a breathing test as well as an X-ray.

What You Can Do Now to Protect Yourself from Black Lung Disease

- **MINIMIZE** your exposure to respirable coal mine dust on every shift, every day.
- **KNOW** and **USE** all controls specified in the mine's approved ventilation plan.
- **INSIST** that effective control measures are applied and maintained.
- **BE SURE** that dust levels where you work are being accurately monitored.

--REMEMBER--

Black lung is NOT curable, but it is preventable!

If you have questions about coal mine health matters, please contact your local MSHA office or see the MSHA website at www.msha.gov.