

Respirable Crystalline Silica
Health Effects Information
Source: osha.gov

Breathing in very small ("respirable") crystalline silica particles, causes multiple diseases, including silicosis, an incurable lung disease that leads to disability and death. Respirable crystalline silica also causes lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and kidney disease. Exposure to respirable crystalline silica is related to the development of autoimmune disorders and cardiovascular impairment. These occupational diseases are life-altering and debilitating disorders that annually affect thousands of workers across the United States.

Silicosis

Breathing crystalline silica dust can cause silicosis, which in severe cases can be disabling, or even fatal. When silica dust enters the lungs, it causes the formation of scar tissue, which makes it difficult for the lungs to take in oxygen. There is no cure for silicosis.

Silicosis typically occurs after 15–20 years of occupational exposure to respirable crystalline silica. Symptoms may or may not be obvious; therefore, workers need to have a chest x-ray to determine if there is lung damage. As the disease progresses, the worker may experience shortness of breath upon exercising. In the later stages, the worker may experience fatigue, extreme shortness of breath, chest pain, or respiratory failure. Because silicosis affects the immune system, exposure to silica increases the risk of lung infections, such as tuberculosis. In addition, smoking causes lung damage and adds to the damage caused by breathing silica dust.

In rare instances, individuals exposed to very high concentrations of respirable crystalline silica can develop typical silicosis symptoms as well as fever and weight loss within weeks instead of years. In these cases, medical evaluation should be performed as soon as possible.

Lung Cancer

Exposure to respirable crystalline silica increases the risk of developing lung cancer. Lung cancer is a disease where abnormal cells grow uncontrollably into tumors, interfering with lung function. The abnormal cancer cells can also travel ("metastasize") and cause damage to other parts of the body. Most cases are not curable.

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Exposure to respirable crystalline silica increases the risk of other lung diseases, primarily COPD, which includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis. The main symptom of COPD is shortness of breath due to difficulty breathing air into the lungs. COPD is not usually reversible and may worsen over time.

Kidney Disease

Studies of workers exposed to respirable crystalline silica have found that these workers are at increased risk of developing kidney disease. For instance, kidney failure has been observed among workers with high silica exposure, such as in abrasive blasters who also were suffering from silicosis.