

Study Examines Impacts of Malignant Pleural Mesothelioma on Vets

By Greg T. Rinckey

A new study

sheds light on the impact of a lethal cancer on veterans. The study covers Malignant Pleural Mesothelioma (MPM) and its effect on veterans, particularly Caucasians in their early 70s.

The study illustrates the devastating impact this disease has on veterans. Researchers at the VA-Nebraska Western Iowa Health Care System, Creighton University School of Medicine in Nebraska, and the Thomas Jefferson School of Medicine in Pennsylvania found that the median survival time for veterans with MPM was a little over seven months.

The study was published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology

in conjunction with annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncologists in early June. It examined how tobacco and asbestos exposure and treatment options play into the survival rates of veterans. The researchers analyzed 928 patients in the Veterans Affairs Central Cancer Registry between 1995 and 2009. The median age of these patients was 71 years old, with 87.6 percent of them being Caucasian, 8.72 percent being black, and 3.66 percent being other races.

MPM is a cancer that usually starts in the chest with tumor cells growing on the thin membrane known as the mesothelium that covers internal organs. Cancer-causing asbestos is inhaled and tumors develop on the pleural membranes lining the outer lungs or inner chest. Then, MPM can spread, or metastasize, to organs elsewhere in the body. Fire-resistant asbestos was a common component in naval vessels, piping, and adhesives from the 1930s through the 1970s. Many Navy and Coast Guard shipyard workers and machinery repairmen were exposed to the fibrous material.

Up to 50 years can pass from when a veteran was first exposed to asbestos to when he or she develops MPM. The disease is treatable, but not curable. The study found that non-metastatic MPM patients who underwent surgery, with or without chemotherapy or radiation treatment, tended to live 11.7 months. However, those who underwent no surgery only tended to live 7.5 months. The researches concluded, "Younger age, histology, stage of disease and receipt of surgical therapy are associated with improved outcomes whereas race, grade, asbestos or tobacco exposure did not impact the survival."

While medical treatments for MPM are costly, veterans who were exposed to asbestos during their service could sue the asbestos manufacturers under legal theories such as negligence, warranty, and strict liability. They can also apply for special benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans diagnosed with any type of mesothelioma should contact a military law attorney.

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