

A sad legacy—Victims of childhood asbestos exposure

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1953--four-year-old neighbours playing in an asbestos sandpit in a residential backyard in Wittenoom. Residents purchased the deadly tailings which were commonly used as sandpits in backyards for the purposes of children's play and also to reduce dust around houses. Philip Noble (left) grew up to be a keen footballer before dying from mesothelioma at 36. Ross Munroe (right) became a High School Principal and died from mesothelioma at 38. Credit: Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Inc.

(Medical Xpress)—"Wittenoom kids" who spent their childhoods exposed to asbestos in the north-west of Western Australia are now developing a range of cancers or dying at a rate well above the average population, according to a new study by researchers from The University of Western Australia for the UWA-affiliated Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR).

Mining of the deadly blue asbestos at Wittenoom, 1106km north of Perth, ceased in 1966 and the town was later closed after airborne fibres in dust from mining operations were found to cause [malignant mesothelioma](#), [lung cancer](#), [asbestosis](#) and other serious diseases.

While data has been collected previously looking at asbestos-related diseases caused by occupational [asbestos exposure](#) among men (either working in asbestos mining towns or using asbestos products), this new study is the first to look at the long-term health of children who were exposed to asbestos at Wittenoom.

The study, which has been published in the [American Journal of Industrial Medicine](#), shows that girls up to the age of 15 who lived in Wittenoom have been more likely to develop mesothelioma, ovarian and brain cancers and have had increased [death rates](#).

Boys who spent their childhood and early teenage years in Wittenoom during the years that asbestos was mined (1943-1966) now have elevated rates of mesothelioma, leukaemia, prostate, brain and [colorectal cancer](#), diseases of the circulatory and nervous system, and excessive death rates.

"The original township was only 1.6km from the mine," said leading researcher on the paper, WAIMR's Associate Professor Alison Reid. "Later in 1947, when the population grew, the township was moved 12km away from the mine site but tailings from the mine were used throughout the town.

"These tailings, rich in crocidolite fibres, were used to pave roads, footpaths, parking areas, the local racecourse and school playgrounds. They were even used in people's backyards, where, of course, children often played," she said. "These "Wittenoom kids" are now reaching the age where chronic adult diseases are becoming more prevalent and many

have died."

Associate Professor Reid said the study by WAIMR researchers from UWA's School of Population Health found that a total of 2460 former Wittenoom children were documented to have been exposed to blue asbestos before the age of 15.

The median age of their first exposure was at three years of age.

Of the people studied, 63 per cent were either born in Wittenoom or had moved to the mining town by the time they were three years old. The vast majority (93.5 per cent) left Wittenoom by the time they were 16, so were exposed to asbestos only during their childhoods.

By the end of 2007, 228 former residents had died from a range of causes. By the end of 2009, there were 215 cases of cancer in 207 individuals.

This means that compared with the general population in Western Australia, Wittenoom girls have had a 20-47 per cent greater risk of dying from any cause, while boys have had a 50-83 per cent increased chance of dying from any cause.

"We will continue to follow this group to provide important information on the long-term implications of exposure to [asbestos](#) during childhood," Associate Professor Alison Reid said.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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