

What you need to know about accelerated silicosis

What is accelerated silicosis?

Silicosis is a disease that causes scarring of the lungs. Accelerated silicosis is a type of silicosis which may occur after a person has been exposed to large amounts of respirable crystalline silica dust. It typically develops over three to 10 years but there have been cases overseas after less than one year of exposure.

Accelerated silicosis is a serious health condition.

Who is at risk?

People who work with engineered (i.e. artificial) stone are at risk of exposure to respirable crystalline silica, which is created when materials containing silica are cut, ground, drilled, sanded, or polished, which releases respirable crystalline silica into the air.

Crystalline silica is a natural substance found in concrete, bricks, rocks, sand, clay, and stone (including engineered stone in composite benchtops used in kitchens, bathrooms and laundries). Respirable crystalline silica particles are extremely small and can't always be seen with the naked eye. Exposure to respirable crystalline silica dust, from any source, can harm human health.

If you have worked with engineered stone for more than six months in the last 10 years, you should see your General Practitioner (GP) for review.

How can I keep myself safe?

Here are some of the things you can do to minimise the risks of silica dust:

- Wear, use and store personal protective equipment (PPE) correctly, and let the business know if this no longer works.
- Leave dust-covered work clothes at work to be cleaned. Do not wear them home.
- Wash hands before eating, drinking or smoking, and before leaving work at the end of the day.

WorkSafe is New Zealand's primary health and safety regulator. Refer to their website for more information: www.worksafe.govt.nz/dust.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms progress at variable rates between individuals. Some people may have no symptoms in the early stages. Early symptoms could include:

- Shortness of breath
- Harsh, dry cough
- Increasing shortness of breath as disease progresses.

Advanced silicosis symptoms could include:

- Productive cough
- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Trouble sleeping.

How do I find out if my health has been affected by working with engineered stone?

- Start by booking an appointment with your GP for a health check to carry out an initial assessment.
- The Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) is a government agency set up to help you when you are injured in an accident and works to prevent injuries from happening. ACC will pay a contribution towards the cost of the visit to the GP if a work-related claim is lodged. You may be charged a co-payment by the GP who lodges the claim.
- You will be asked for your consent at key stages of the process.
- If your current work (or a previous workplace) has monitored your health in the past, it's important to get these records from your employer and take them with you to your GP.

- Your employer is required to give you a copy of your health information if requested.
- The information you give your GP will become part of your health record, and if an ACC claim is lodged will be shared with ACC. This will help decide if you are eligible to receive ACC or public-funded support.

What happens after the initial GP visit?

- ACC will review the claim made by your GP on your behalf and contact you to advise it has been received and explain next steps. They will also ask for your consent to proceed with the assessment process.
- Your GP or ACC will be involved in different parts of the process and help manage your follow-up as needed.
- If you have any health concerns that are not related to exposure to silica dust, contact your GP.

What kind of tests and assessments may be needed?

If tests and assessments are needed, ACC will advise you to book a follow up appointment with your GP. This would be for a 30-minute appointment funded by ACC. Your GP may send you for tests that could include:

- **Chest x-ray** – You may be asked to get an x-ray of your chest. If this is required, you will be provided with more information about where you can go to get an x-ray.
- **CT scan** (computed tomography scan) – You may be asked to get a CT scan. The CT scanner takes x-rays of many parts of your body to make a 3D image. This is a non-invasive, painless and relatively safe procedure that doesn't require any recovery time.
- **Spirometry** – You may be asked to get a test of how much, how fast and how long you can breathe in and out. This is called spirometry and involves doing different types of breathing into a tube that is connected to a computer or a small machine. This helps to determine how well your lungs are working and if there is anything affecting your breathing.
- **Blood or urine test** – You may be asked to provide a blood or urine sample. You will be given more information about where you can go to get these tests and what will happen to the results.

You could also be sent for further assessment to:

- an **Occupational Physician**, who is a doctor who specialises in managing work-related conditions
- a **Respiratory Physician**, who is a doctor who specialises in diagnosing, treating and preventing conditions and diseases affecting the lungs.

ACC will pay for the tests, assessments and specialist referrals needed to assess your claim.

How will I find out about my results?

- ACC will contact you to discuss the results of any tests or assessments you may have.
- They may discuss a return to work plan or alternative work plan with you, your GP and employer (with your consent) based on the tests and assessments.
- Any further referrals for treatment and support will be made based on your individual needs with your consent.

What counselling support can I get?

This may be a worrying time for you. Your GP can tell you about local counselling support which may be helpful for you and your family. Your employer may have an Employee Assistance Programme you can use. Talk to your employer for more information.

National telephone support services such as the 1737 National Telehealth Service (call or text 1737) or Lifeline Aotearoa (text 4357, call 0800 543 354) are available 24/7 and are free.

To find out about counselling services in your area, you can call Healthline on 0800 611 116.

Where can I get more information?

- Ministry of Health: <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/accelerated-silicosis>
- ACC: www.acc.co.nz/silicosis
- WorkSafe New Zealand: www.worksafe.govt.nz/dust