

## **Organic solvents – the potential health risks**

Up to 2.5 million people in the UK regularly work with organic solvents but many are unaware of the danger posed to their health from over exposure to substances such as toluene. Toluene is a clear, water-insoluble, flammable liquid. It has a sweet, sharp odour and is also known as methylbenzene or toluol. Other examples of organic solvents include acetone, methyl ethyl ketone and trichloroethane. If you are exposed to high levels of organic solvents and suffer an injury as a result, you should contact a specialist solicitor who will be able to advise you if you can bring a claim for compensation.

### **Who is at risk of Toluene Poisoning?**

Toluene is a common solvent which is able to dissolve paint, paint thinners, silicone sealants, rubber, printing ink, adhesives, lacquers, disinfectants and leather tanners. It is often used in the production of chemicals, detergents, dyes, inks, plastics, perfumes and medicines. Products which contain toluene include adhesives, glues, nail polish, paints, varnishes, thinners, metal cleaners, rust preservatives, metal cleaners and flame retardants. Industries in which you may find yourself working with toluene include printing, painting, textiles, footwear, engineering and dry cleaning.

### **What are the symptoms and effects of Toluene Poisoning?**

Toluene can enter your body when it evaporates and you inhale contaminated air. It can also be absorbed through your skin, especially if you have had a long period of skin contact.

You should be aware that over exposure to toluene can have adverse effects on your health and you may develop a headache, nausea, clumsiness and drowsiness. Frequent contact with your skin may lead to dermatitis with dryness, redness, blistering and cracking of the skin. The symptoms may make you appear drunk and in a similar way may increase your risk of suffering an accident or injury.

If you have a short period of over exposure to toluene the symptoms generally clear up within a matter of hours after the exposure ends. Most experts are of the opinion that recurring exposure to high levels of toluene and other organic solvents can do serious and often permanent damage to your nervous system. You may develop

sleeplessness, difficulty in concentrating, loss of short term memory and a change in personality such as anxiety, irritability, and depression. American experts have warned that such effects can be misconstrued as symptoms of dementia or multiple sclerosis.

A recent medical study has also linked high levels of solvent exposure to kidney problems. In many cases the kidneys will return to normal after such exposures. However, this study established that solvent exposure may have a role in the progression of kidney disease to end stage renal disease. The risk of kidney disease is linked to the level and duration of exposure to solvents. This study emphasised that patients who are diagnosed with kidney problems should be asked about their occupations and potential solvent exposures. If you are told that you have kidney problems and you have worked with solvents you may be entitled to claim compensation.

### **How is Toluene Poisoning diagnosed?**

If you think you have been exposed to high levels of toluene you need to seek medical advice as soon as possible after exposure as toluene leaves your body quickly. Studies have shown that more than 75% of toluene leaves the body within 12 hours. Tests will therefore not determine whether you have been over exposed in the past. If you have chronic exposure, for example as a result of a spillage, then it may be necessary to have blood and urine tests to determine whether any of your organs have been damaged. If you are in doubt about whether you have been 'over exposed' it is advisable to seek medical advice quickly. The effects of toluene poisoning are treatable and most people make a full recovery.

### **How should my employer protect me from toluene poisoning?**

Your employer has a legal duty to prevent, or if that is not possible, minimise your exposure to toluene. The most effective way of ensuring over exposure does not occur is to use a safer chemical, where possible. If the use of toluene is necessary your employer should ensure that there is effective ventilation in the workplace. Containers and vats should be sealed or tightly covered to prevent evaporation. Employers should also consider whether certain work processes could be isolated or enclosed to reduce exposure as far as possible. If work does take place in a confined space further precautions should be taken. Protective equipment, including respirators, goggles and gloves should be issued and maintained. Your employer must also provide you with training and advice on the safe use of toluene.

### **Can I bring a claim against my employer for toluene poisoning?**

There are regulations in force to protect employees from exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace. If your employer breaches these regulations they may be liable to pay you compensation. A specialist solicitor will be able to advise you whether your employer has failed to take reasonable care for your safety and whether you can bring a claim for toluene poisoning.

There are time limits in place for bringing a compensation claim so it is advisable to seek legal advice quickly if you develop toluene poisoning or if you believe you have developed another industrial disease, for example, asthma caused by exposure to a substance in the workplace.

If you do have a claim against your employer we can represent you on a 'no win no fee' basis ensuring that you do not have to worry about legal costs and that you will receive your compensation in full. If you would like further advice on this topic or any other industrial disease claim please do not hesitate to contact us for a free discussion.

#### **Further information:**

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[Contact us](#) to find out more about your entitlement to claim compensation if you have been diagnosed with an occupational illness.

**[John Pickering and Partners LLP](#)**- Specialist **[mesothelioma compensation solicitors](#)**

We are a specialist personal injury law firm. We have been handling claims for industrial disease for over 30 years. Most of our work involves acting for asbestos disease victims.

We only act for the sufferers of asbestos diseases and never act for the organisations that caused the asbestos exposure or their insurers. We have an ethical approach and pledge to donate 10% of our net profits every year to good causes that help asbestos sufferers. [Click here](#) to find out about our donations to good causes. We have also been involved in most of the landmark judgments that shape this area of law. Find out

more [about us](#) or find out about [our reported cases](#). We are on the panels of several asbestos support groups and are ranked highly by legal guides. [Click here](#) to find out more about what others have said about us.

[John Pickering and Partners LLP](#) is a niche legal practice that has represented Claimants in the leading asbestos "test cases" in the last ten years. The firm represented Sylvia Barker in *Barker v Corus (UK) Plc*, a case that highlighted the legal tactics of employers and insurers trying to cut back their compensation liabilities to mesothelioma sufferers, and which prompted the amendment of the Compensation Act 2006 to ensure full compensation for mesothelioma claims. The firm represented two of the three Claimants in the *Fairchild appeal*, in which the insurance industry tried unsuccessfully to block compensation altogether for mesothelioma sufferers unable to identify which of two or more sources of asbestos exposure had caused their illness.

The firm represented Alice Jefferson, a mesothelioma sufferer, whose illness and compensation claim against Cape Asbestos were featured in the important documentary "*Alice: A Fight For Life*." Shown by Yorkshire Television in July 1982, the programme was an important catalyst for legal change and public awareness of the plight of mesothelioma and other asbestos disease sufferers and a prompt for important legal reform.

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that affects the lining of certain bodily organs. It most commonly affects the lining of the lungs (the pleura) but it can affect other areas including organs in the abdominal cavity (the peritoneum).

According to the [British Lung Foundation](#), more than 2,000 people are diagnosed with mesothelioma every year in the UK and there is one mesothelioma death every five hours. The number of deaths from mesothelioma increased from 153 in 1968 to 1,969 in 2004 and is expected to peak at 2,450 between 2011 and 2015.

The [British Lung Foundation](#), supported by John Pickering and Partners LLP, launched the first Action Mesothelioma Day on 27th February 2006, to raise awareness about mesothelioma, to improve the treatment and care of mesothelioma patients, and to lobby for better funding for research into mesothelioma and for the protection and education of people working with asbestos.

If you need advice about an asbestos related illness, [contact us](#) now for information about making a claim for compensation.