

## TOOLBOX TALK #8

### **SILICOSIS: WHAT IS IT AND HOW TO AVOID IT**

Silicosis is a disabling, deadly and incurable lung disease. It often is caused by breathing in the dust of crystalline silica, which can be found in concrete, sandstone, rock, paint and other abrasives, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Although crystalline silica dust may seem harmless (sometimes it is too small to even see), it is not.

Many job tasks place workers at risk for inhaling silica dust, NIOSH notes, including:

- Using power tools to remove paint or rust
- Performing abrasive blasting
- Grinding mortar
- Crushing, hauling, chipping and drilling concrete or rock
- Dry-sweeping dust from crushed concrete or rock
- Finishing drywall
- Performing various construction jobs, such as bridge and highway repair.



Three types of silicosis exists:

1. **Chronic silicosis.** The most common form of the disease, chronic silicosis generally develops after 10 or more years of exposure to low levels of crystalline silica, NIOSH states.
2. **Accelerated silicosis.** This form of silicosis tends to show up 5 to 10 years after exposure to higher levels of crystalline silica.
3. **Acute silicosis.** Occurring months or even weeks after exposure to very high levels of crystalline silica, acute silicosis can lead to death in only months, NIOSH states.

So how do you know you have a form of silicosis? It can be difficult – the disease can remain undetected for decades. However, common symptoms include severe coughing, feeling weak and suffering from shortness of breath.

Silicosis can reduce your body's ability to fight infections, and people with the disease are at risk for other lung diseases, such as tuberculosis, according to NIOSH.

To help prevent the development of silicosis, NIOSH recommends the following:

- Know the dangers of breathing in crystalline silica dust, and avoid working in or near dust whenever possible.
- Remember: Even if you cannot see dust, you may still be at risk.
- Use water spray systems and proper ventilation in confined spaces.
- If water systems and ventilation are not enough, your employer must provide respirators specifically designed to protect against crystalline silica.
- Take advantage of health and lung screenings offered by your employer.
- Thoroughly wash your hands before eating or drinking in dusty areas.
- Shower and change into clean clothes before leaving work to help prevent contamination of your car or home.