

# Borrowing From Big Tobacco's Playbook, Johnson & Johnson Knew About Asbestos in Baby Powder for Decades: Reuters



Image Credit: Reuters

One attorney said 1970s memos that have surfaced due to recent lawsuits are “on par with key docs uncovered in the tobacco litigation.”

Jessica Corbett | [Common Dreams](#)

A *Reuters* [investigation](#) published Friday charges that Johnson & Johnson, a multi-billion dollar company [known](#) for its healthcare products, knew for decades that its iconic talcum baby powder “was sometimes tainted with carcinogenic asbestos,” but concealed the information from regulators and the public.

Asbestos, “the name given to six minerals that occur naturally in the environment as bundles of fibers,” has been used in North America’s automotive, construction, and shipbuilding industries since the late 1800s, [according to](#) the National Cancer Institute. The World Health Organization (WHO) [warns](#) that “all types of asbestos cause lung cancer, mesothelioma, cancer of the larynx and ovary, and asbestosis (fibrosis of the lungs).”

Because asbestos sometimes occurs in the earth along with talc, [contamination](#) is possible. *Reuters*—along with attorneys for more than 11,000 plaintiffs currently suing Johnson & Johnson, claiming the company’s products caused their cancer—examined memos, internal reports, and other confidential documents as well as deposition and trial testimony.

That mountain of evidence, according to *Reuters*, revealed

*that from at least 1971 to the early 2000s, the company’s raw talc and finished powders sometimes tested positive for small amounts of asbestos, and that company executives, mine managers, scientists, doctors, and lawyers fretted over the problem and how to address it while failing to disclose it to regulators or the public.*

*The documents also depict successful efforts to influence U.S. regulators’ plans to limit asbestos in cosmetic talc products and [scientific research](#) on the health effects of talc.*

While, over the past two decades, some legal challenges claiming that Johnson & Johnson products were tainted with asbestos and caused cancer have been unsuccessful, three recent developments seem to signal a shift. A pair of cases in New Jersey and California saw significant awards for mesothelioma patients, and a “watershed” verdict in St. Louis expanded the company’s potential liability.

Outlining the St. Louis case, *Reuters* explained:

*The 22 plaintiffs were the first to succeed with a claim that asbestos-tainted Baby Powder and Shower to Shower talc, a longtime brand the company sold in 2012, caused ovarian cancer, which is much more common than mesothelioma. The jury awarded them \$4.69 billion in damages. Most of the talc cases have been brought by women with ovarian cancer who say they regularly used J&J talc products as a perineal antiperspirant and deodorant.*

“When people really understand what’s going on,” said Mark Lanier, an attorney for one of the plaintiffs, “I think it increases J&J’s exposure a thousand-fold.”

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