A 76-year-old man was referred for evaluation of an asymptomatic left lower lobe mass. He had a history of asbestos exposure, as he worked aboard a navy ship in the 1950s for 5 years. He carried a 60 pack-year smoking history but had quit smoking 30 years earlier. Cardiopulmonary examination was unremarkable. Pulmonary function test (PFT) demonstrated a restrictive pattern with normal diffusion capacity. CT of the chest revealed five benign findings of pleural asbestosis (figures 1–3).

Benign asbestos pleural effusion is an early manifestation of pleural asbestosis occurring after a few decades of asbestos exposure (figure 1). The pleural effusion is generally minimal and unilateral. Thoracentesis profile sometimes reveals a hemorrhagic exudate. Pleural plaques are fibrous tissues originating from the parietal pleura classically distributed in the lateral chest wall between the sixth and ninth ribs, sparing apices and costophrenic angles. It typically does not cause pulmonary symptoms nor does it affect the PFT. Calcification of the pleural plaques occurs in long-lasting mature plaques. Involvement of the diaphragmatic pleura is pathognomonic for asbestos plaques (figures 1–2). In contrast, pleural thickening secondary to chronic inflammation predominantly involves the visceral pleura, which contributes to a restrictive pattern and impaired ventilation. Pleural thickening does not calcify and can blunt the costophrenic angles. Rounded atelectasis is an atelectatic area of the lung adjacent to the pleural thickening and is strongly associated with asbestos exposure (figure 3). It occurs as a consequence of the pleural thickening and can involve any lobe.3 Round atelectasis sometimes spontaneously resolves. It is metabolically inactive on PET-CT imaging.1 A fibrotic band is a thickening of the visceral pleura resulting in a pleural-parenchymal fibrous band radiating from the pleura (figure 1). These bands should not be confused with interstitial lung disease.1 Radiologic follow-up of our patient over the course of 2 years revealed the stability of these findings confirming the benign aetiology. Thus, he required no further investigations.

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Learning points

▸ Physicians should be cognisant of the patterns and benign nature of pleural conditions associated with asbestos exposure.

▸ The common radiographic manifestations of pleural asbestosis are pleural plaque with or without calcification, pleural thickening and round atelectasis. Other pleural diseases associated with asbestos exposure include benign pleural effusion and fibrotic bands.

▸ The evidence suggests that pleural plaques are not associated with malignant transformation. However, a history of asbestos exposure is the major risk factor for malignant mesothelioma and is a significant risk factor for bronchogenic alveolar carcinoma especially with a history of cigarette smoking.

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