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Asbestos Fibers Found in Baby Powder

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Asbestos fibers, which are found in thousands of products from food to building insulation, have been discovered in nine of 19 body and baby powders studied by researchers at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York.

Asbestos can cause mesothelioma, a rare form of chest and abdominal cancer, and asbestosis, scarring of lung tissue. In 1972 Dr. William J. Nicholson of Mt. Sinai reported that these diseases caused nearly 40 per cent of the deaths of New York-New Jersey asbestos workers.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of Mt. Sinai, a leading expert on occupational disease, said, "We do not know a safe threshold level for a carcinogen like asbestos." Once asbestos fibers enter the body, he said, they stay there.

Researchers at Mt. Sinai's Department of Environmental Medicine tested one sample each of 19 body and baby powders. Arthur M. Langer, head of the physical sciences section of the department, said nine samples contained asbestos fibers in quantities ranging from "2 to 20 per cent."

The powders with the greatest concentration of asbestos fibers, ranging from 8 to 20 per cent, were ZBT Baby Powder with baby oil, Cashmere Bouquet Body Talc, Coty Airspun Face Powder and Rosemary Talc.

Bauer & Black Baby Talc, which is no longer on the market, had a 15 per cent concentration of asbestos fibers, the researchers found.

Smaller amounts of asbestos fibers—under 5 per cent — were found in Faberge Brut Talc, Yardley Invisible Talc, Yardley Black Label Body Powder, Mennen Shave Talc and English Leather After Shave Talc.

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Officials of Colgate Palmolive, which makes Cashmere Bouquet, Sterling Drugs, Inc., manufacturer of ZBT Baby Powder and of Coty said they are certain their products are safe. They said no asbestos had been found in their testing.

The manufacturer of Rosemary Talc could not be reached for comment.

The other powders studied were Ammen's Medicated Powder; Avon Bird of Paradise Beauty Dust; Diaperene Medicated Body Powder; Johnson's Baby Powders, one made in England and one in the United States; Johnson's Medicated Powder; Mennen Bath Talc; Yardley After Shave Powder and Yardley Original Body Powder. None of them contained asbestos. One, Diaperene, contained no talc. It is made of cornstarch.

The Food and Drug Administration said in 1972 it would propose regulations to govern the use of asbestos-contaminated talc in cosmetics. The director of FDA's division of cosmetics technology, Heinz J. Eirmann, said recently the agency had not issued regulations because it had not found a "fast method" for determining the presence of asbestos at low levels. The sophisticated method used at Mt. Sinai, electron microscopy, he said, was too time consuming and expensive.

The Mt. Sinai researchers, who have conducted the study under a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Services since 1973, also investigated the powders for the presence of other metallic elements, including nickel.

With the exception of Rosemary Talc and Diaperene which contained no nickel, 16 of the powders contained from 4 to 710 parts per million (ppm) of nickel. A sample of Johnson's Baby Powder contained 2,290 ppm.

Surprised at what they regarded as a high nickel content of the powder, the researchers purchased seven more samples. Five of them had 1,800 ppm or more of nickel; two had fewer than 710 ppm. Langer said researchers "don't know if the nickel is hazardous at high levels."

Dr. F. William Sunderman, Jr., head of the department of laboratory medicine at the University of Connecticut and an expert on nickel, said: "We're trying to find out which nickel compounds do cause cancer and which don't. Certain nickel compounds are carcinogenic when inhaled; others are not."

Johnson & Johnson's associate director for public affairs, Robert Kniffin, said the nickel in the talc is "harmless" because "it is biologically inert" and won't react with body tissues.

A study revealed last September by Dr. J. C. Wagner of the Pneumoconiosis Research Unit at Penarth, Wales, raised the question about the safety of talc itself, the major ingredient in powders. Wagner found that asbestos-free talc caused fibrosis, lung scarring in the test animals "at the same rate as asbestos."

Epidemiological studies have shown that talc workers develop talcosis, another form of lung scarring, from exposure to large amounts of the mineral.

According to Selikoff, the amount of talc that must be inhaled to cause tissue scarring or cancer in humans is not known.