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Does Asbestos Cause Cancer?

By DAVID HESS

Evidence is mounting that asbestos, used increasingly as an insulating agent, is contributing to higher rates of lung cancer.

In the July issue of "Today's Health," a leading lung pathologist says: "Asbestos is an important air pollutant. In fact, it is the only common air pollutant clearly identified to cause lung cancer in man."

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, past president of the New York Academy of Sciences and chief of the Environmental Health Science Laboratory at New York's Mt. Sinai Hospital, says asbestos contamination of lung tissue is "now widespread."

"SMALL AMOUNTS of asbestos in the lungs have not yet been proven hazardous," he admits. "And it may well be that very small amounts will not be associated with any health hazard.

"But we shouldn't wait to find out. If contamination is seen to occur, we must control it as rapidly as possible."

One problem in pinning it down, Dr. Selikoff says, stems from the fact that lung disease associated with asbestos often takes 20 or 30 years to develop.

Therefore, he says, "our concern must be for the future," particularly since heavy asbestos contamination has been shown to produce lung disease among insulation workers.

"ONE OUT of every five insulation workers in the New York-New Jersey area," says Today's Health, "dies of lung cancer, and almost half the 265 deaths recorded among these men in the past 25 years have been caused by cancer of one type or another."

Today, Dr. Selikoff says, more than 100,000 industrial workers in the United States are exposed to heavy concentrations of asbestos dust, not only in the construction trades but in the cement, asphalt and plastic industries.

DR. GEORGE WRIGHT, lung disease specialist at Cleveland's St. Luke's Hospital, claims Dr. Selikoff is unduly alarmed.

"The risk to the general public posed by mostly intermittent exposure to low concentrations of asbestos . . . has been exaggerated," he says.

"I'm all for control of dusty emanations, but I'm opposed to scare tactics."

DR. WRIGHT agrees with Dr. Selikoff's fears of heavy exposures to asbestos dust. "But," he adds, "there is evidence that a low concentration of asbestos in the air is not likely to be harmful."

Whatever the case, Dr. Selikoff insists that "awareness of the potential risks is needed until our studies indicate how far out into the general population the problem extends."

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N.Y's Lindsay Halts Spraying Of Asbestos

NEW YORK — Mayor John V. Lindsay ordered a halt yesterday to the spraying of asbestos, suspected as a cause of cancer, at all city construction sites.

"There is an extraordinarily high correlation between the amount of asbestos inhaled and the contraction of cancer," said John Leo, spokesman for the city's Environmental Protection Administration. "The correlation is the same as that for smoking."

Leo said Dr. Irving Selikoff of Mt. Sinai Hospital, who has been studying the problem since 1953, found that one out of five asbestos workers in the New York area dies of lung cancer.

"And you can't get rid of it," Leo said. "Once it's been inhaled it stays in the lungs forever."

Selikoff told a city hearing in May that everyone in New York City has some asbestos in his lungs. He said there was no way to avoid it in New York.

Asbestos is a covering which insulates and strengthens steel girders at construction sites. It is also used on auto brakes. Cars, in addition to exhaust fumes, are also thought to pollute the atmosphere with asbestos.

"The problem with cars," Leo said, "is that it's very hard to measure how much asbestos is thrown off. At construction sites, it's much easier."

Asbestos workers suffer chest and lung diseases at 10 times the rate of the general population, Leo said.

On April 10, the city ordered private contractors to cover the area being sprayed with tarpaulins to cut down the asbestos dust.

Leo said the Lindsay administration was still debating whether to extend the asbestos ban to private contractors.