

PCU
PCEB
17/8/75

Asbestos Spray Link To Cancer Revealed

By LOUIS TIMNICK

Asbestos spray used as fireproofing in most buildings during the last 17 years may be putting millions of American office workers in danger of developing cancer, particularly if they smoke.

A new study by the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine's Environmental Sciences Laboratory in New York found dangerously high levels of asbestos fibers in office buildings in five major cities.

Asbestos was sprayed onto the steelwork of most buildings erected in the 1960s and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) banned it in 1973 after finding high concentrations of cancer-causing fibers in the air around construction sites.

Today several alternative fireproofing substances have been developed, and most new buildings are sprayed with rock wool mineral fiber or coated with gypsum and vermiculite mixture.

But asbestos remains in the plenum space (the two or three feet between a false ceiling and the underside of the floor above) of thousands of modern high-rises, eventually breaking loose and circulating into offices through the air conditioning and heating systems.

"We are seeing concentrations inside the office buildings as high as we saw in areas near asbestos plants or where spraying was being done," said Dr. William J. Nicholson, who conducted the Mt. Sinai study.

Asbestos workers have been shown to face a greatly increased risk of developing lung cancer, Mesothelioma (a rare cancer of the lining of the chest and abdomen), cancers of the gastrointestinal tract and asbestosis (a scarring of the lungs) — particularly if they also smoke.

The risk to any single individual is small, Nicholson says.

"Smoking two packs of cigarettes a day increases your risk of dying of lung cancer by some 40 per cent; here we are talking about less than one per cent. But because millions of people are exposed, it is a significant public health concern."

And, he noted, since asbestos and cigarettes have been shown to work as a deadly combination among asbestos workers, smokers exposed to even low levels of asbestos in offices may be affected.

The country's leading expert on asbestos, Mt. Sinai's Dr. Irving Belikoff, recently warned that "we are all contaminated" by the ubiquitous fibers since asbestos is also found in clothing, drinking water and roads.

Nicholson said the EPA is studying monitoring methods and special filters for use in buildings containing asbestos.

While these are being developed, however, "We can do something," he said.

"Proper maintenance may prevent more than 50 per cent of the contamination," he said. "Maintenance personnel who have to go into the plenum space to repair wiring or pipes should be aware of the hazards and take care not to disturb or damage the asbestos. A mask for the worker would be appropriate, and if the asbestos has to be removed while he fixes, say, a light fixture, it should be wetted first."

Federal regulations treat asbestos as "a hazardous pollutant." Anyone suspecting an asbestos problem should contact the local health department or regional EPA office.

Newhouse News Service