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No Known Safe Level for Asbestos Exposure

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Do you work with asbestos? It's worth finding out, because asbestos is one of the most serious threats to the health of American workers.

Asbestos can be found at construction sites, shipyards, textile and chemical plants, auto repair shops, schools, paper mills, and many other workplaces. It can travel from one part of a work area to another through ventilation systems. It can be inhaled or swallowed with food.

In all, three to five million workers may be exposed to asbestos. Studies have shown that more than 40 percent of asbestos workers will die of asbestos-related diseases. Even very brief exposure may cause a deadly lung disease or cancer which may not show up for 20 years or more. Other studies have shown that 38 percent of asbestos workers' family members may suffer lung disorders, apparently as a result of exposure to fibers which are brought home on work clothes.

There is no known safe level for exposure to asbestos, so it is important that your employer reduce your exposure as much as possible. The standard issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires your employer to limit average exposure over an 8-hour shift to two asbestos fibers longer than five micrometers in each cubic centimeter of air.



Dr. Bingham

To meet this standard, employers must use engineering controls. These may include isolation and enclosure of work processes, exhaust ventilation systems, and dust collection. All hand-operated and power-operated tools which might release asbestos must be equipped with local exhaust systems. As far as possible, asbestos must be kept wet when being handled.

Employers must provide approved respirators while changes are being made to reduce exposure, or if otherwise necessary. Workers who can't function normally when wearing a respirator may not be assigned to tasks which require respirator use. Employers must also provide change rooms, two separate clothes lockers, and laundry service so that asbestos fibers will not be transferred to street cloths.

At workplaces where asbestos is present, employers must conduct tests at least exery six months to determine asbestos exposure levels. They also must provide regular medical examinations. Workers have the right to see their exposure records, and to have their medical records made available to their doctors.

If you have questions about asbestos and the OSHA asbestos standard, contact the nearest OSHA office. Look in your phone book under "United States Government, Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration," or write to OSHA, 3rd and Constitution Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210.

Court Seeks State Safety Standards

A federal district court has ordered the Occupational Safety & Health Administration to establish definitive benchmarks for states that operate their own job safety plans to insure a "fully effective enforcement program."

The ruling by the U.S. District Court Judge John Lewis Smith, Jr., of the District of Columbia is the result of a challenge the AFL-CIO and the Industrial Union Dept. initiated in 1974 because of concerns over the quality of state safety plans approved by OSHA.

After an appellate court upheld the grounds for the suit, Judge Smith directed the Secretary of Labor to set benchmarks and timetables for new and existing state plans on the staffing of inspectors and industrial hygienists and criteria for needed funds to effectively operate the programs.

The order calls for federal officials to utilize "the best information and techniques currently available" in determining the number of hygienists states need to run an effective workplace safety program.

It gives OSHA 90 days to come up with a program for establishment of the benchmarks and to determine by next May 1 which states are deficient in meeting the goals of the 1970 federal job safety and health law.

The order lays down a five-year timetable in which states must fully meet funding and staffing levels to bring their plans to par with the federal enforcement program. The improvements must come in annual increments of 20 percent each, the court said.

George H. R. Taylor, the AFL-CIO's occupational safety and health director, said that Judge Smith's ruling was a welcome development in labor's efforts to improve the quality of sub-standard state programs.

He noted there is a strong possibility the ruling would prompt a number of below-par state plans to be abandoned in favor of more effective federal enforcement.

OSHA has the authority to crack down on state plans that fail to meet the standards of operation laid down by the federal safety law, Taylor noted, but thus far, its actions have come mainly in threats to lift the safety agency's approval.

Currently, 24 states operate OSHA-approved plans, which under certain conditions pre-empt federal jurisdiction on enforcement of the 1970 job safety law.

The court said that in establishing the benchmarks, OSHA must consider in each state:

- The number of employers and workers.
- The number and type of health hazards.
- The number of general inspections that should be conducted annually to provide proper coverage.
- The anticipated number of health-related complaints and accident inspections.

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