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WHIC

A Good Whistle Blower

Even Asbestos Has Its Dangers

Asbestos, a substance used in a great variety of industrial products, can be very dangerous to people who come in contact with it.

Asbestos is a mixture of magnesium, calcium, and iron. If the fine fibers that make up the substance are inhaled, the cells of the body cannot get rid of them, and a diffuse inflammatory reaction occurs in the lungs. Ultimately, normal lung tissue is replaced by fibrous tissue—and cancer is possible.



The incidence of asbestosis, as the condition is called, is rising. This coincides with increased use of the material. In 1920, world production was 300,000 tons; today it is 3,500,000 tons a year. About 40 per cent of the world's output is consumed in this country.

The disease progresses slowly, so that we may now be seeing the results of exposure as long as 30 years ago. Experts conjecture that the rate will be much higher 30 years from now.

There are about 30,000 workers in the asbestos industry in this country, and another 3,000,000 in the construction industry, who are exposed to the material. Many others, though, can have casual but just as dangerous exposure, simply by living near an industrial or construction site.

Shortness of breath is the dominant symptom of the condition with a severity out of proportion to the apparent change in the lung tissue. Sufferers also are prone to tuberculosis infection. More importantly, cancer of the lungs occurs in about 13 per cent of such victims, and the death rate from cancer of the stomach, colon, and rectum is unusually high even though no one knows why these organs are affected.

Doctors also are mystified by the appearance of a rare tissue tumor, mesothelioma, which is found increasingly in asbestosis victims. They do not know if it is the result of prolonged exposure, or whether a casual exposure can produce

it too. The tumor was found in 12 of 300 workers in the industry who were examined after their deaths.

Usually the case is diagnosed by X rays of the lungs. It can be discovered also by finding "asbestos bodies" in the sputum, yellow rod-like structures shaped like drum sticks and consisting of an asbestos core surrounded by thick, albuminous material.

No one has discovered a method of treatment for the condition, which is considered invariably fatal. The only prevention suggested is special precautions for people constantly exposed to asbestos, such as masks, air filtration, and improvement of environmental conditions. It is also suggested that people not ordinarily exposed to asbestos avoid any contact with the material when it is in use, as when insulation is installed in a new home.

—JOHN HENDERSON, M.D.

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