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STUDY FINDS RISK IN ASBESTOS LEVEL

Hazard Noted in Breathing Formerly 'Safe' Amounts

By JANE E. BRODY

Asbestos workers have been found to develop serious lung disease after two decades of breathing air containing asbestos fibers in amounts long considered "safe."

The finding, reported yesterday by a Harvard research team in the New England Journal of Medicine, points up the need for a reconsideration of what is a safe, low level of exposure to asbestos fibers.

An editorial accompanying the journal article states that the present allowable level should be lowered and that "there is now a clear need for more decisive action on control measures."

The study involved 195 workers in a private New England shipyard—101 pipe coverers who prepared and applied insulating materials to machinery and pipes and 94 "controls" of similar age, duration of employment and smoking habits.

The Harvard team, headed by Dr. Raymond L. H. Murphy Jr. of the department of physiology, found that asbestosis—lung scarring caused by asbestos fibers—was 11 times more common among the pipe coverers than among the controls.

After 20 years of exposure to asbestos-containing air, 38 per cent of the pipe coverers had evidence of asbestosis, the doctors reported.

Dust exposure among asbestos workers in the shipyard had been under study for 20 years and remained near the so-called "threshold limit value" then recommended of five million particles per cubic foot of air. This level was long considered to be "safe" for workers chronically exposed.

The industrial threshold limit value is curently expressed more precisely in terms of the amount of asbestos fibers in the air. However, the current value of 12 fibers of asbestos per milliliter of air is also considered to be too high by researchers in the field.

New Standard Asked

Several researchers and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations have recently asked the United States Department of Labor to set a new "emergency standard" of two fibers per milliliter on grounds that the 12-fiber level represents a serious danger to the health of asbestos workers.

The Labor Department said yesterday that "this request is under consideration by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration."

Actually, even a level of two fibers per milliliter, which is one-thousandth of a liter, may be hazardous, according to another study by Dr. Murphy and his colleagues. They found that some workers who sanded asbestos floor tiles also developed lung disease after chronic exposure to an estimated level of 1.3 fibers per milliliter.

The journal editorial noted that even at a level of 1 fiber per milliliter, a worker breathing 15 liters of air each minute for eight hours would inhale 10 million fibers every work day. "Although only a fraction of the inhaled fibers remains in the lung, these figures suggest that an alarming number will still accumulate over a 10-year period," the editorial states.

At heavy levels of exposure, asbestos fibers have been linked to a greatly increased risk of developing lung cancer.

The general public—and particularly the urban residents—is also exposed to asbestos fibers, which can be found not only in air but also in drinking water, wine and beer. Asbestos fibers have been found in the lungs of persons who were never exposed to asbestos industrially. However, there is no evidence at present for asbestos-linked disease in the general population.

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