

Asbestos no threat to most of us

By JERRY NESLER
Sentinel staff writer

Although products containing asbestos, a known human carcinogen, are frequently being phased out in the United States and will be completely banned within the next several years, asbestos still is prevalent in our society.

Once widely used for insulation and other purposes, asbestos may be present in our homes, in the brake and clutch pads in our cars, in our offices and our children's schools, even in the air we breathe on our streets.

For the vast majority of us, the risks are relatively small, according to a City of Milwaukee health official and a Medical College of Wisconsin physician who has done research on how asbestos causes disease.

Although asbestos is a hazardous substance, the mere fact that it is present in a building doesn't necessarily mean it's dangerous, they said.

"People should respect the fact that it's a carcinogen, but they shouldn't lose sleep at night about it," said David J. Krey, technical coordinator for the Environmental Health Division of the Milwaukee Health Department. "The chances are that at sometime in their life they have an exposure to it."

But the odds are the exposure was not enough to cause problems because the risks of developing asbestos-related diseases are tied to the length of exposure to the asbestos fibers and to the amount of fibers in the air at the time of exposure, Krey said.

In fact, studies have shown that most urban dwellers already have some asbestos fibers in their lungs, said Ralph M. Schapiro, an assistant professor at the Medical College, who specializes in pulmonary medicine.

Most cases of asbestos-related diseases occur in people who were exposed to asbestos repeatedly in their jobs, such as asbestos workers, Schapiro said.

Before coming to Milwaukee last year, Schapiro was a researcher at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences near Raleigh, N.C., where he did research on asbestos-related lung diseases, particularly asbestosis.

Besides asbestosis, a disease involving scarring of the lungs, asbestos can cause lung cancer and

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—RALPH M. SCHAPIRO,
Medical College of Wisconsin

mesothelioma, a cancer of the outer lining of the lungs, among other illnesses.

"Most of these diseases are dose-dependent," Schapiro said. "Most people don't have anything to worry about."

Asbestos can be removed safely by trained professionals, but there is even some controversy about whether it should be removed in the first place.

Just last year a comprehensive study on the subject, published in *Science* magazine, criticized the current policy of widespread removal of asbestos in schools and buildings and suggested that it may pose more health risks than just leaving it in place.

Saying the country was caught up in an asbestos panic, the authors concluded that removing asbestos only creates a risk to workers who remove it and does not substantially lower the risk to the building's occupants.

Krey disagreed.

"If it's done properly, there should be less of a risk to the workers and the occupants of the building than when it was there," Krey said. "If the asbestos is gone, you don't have to worry about it."

According to Krey and Schapiro, substances containing asbestos, such as insulation, become potentially dangerous only when they are friable — in other words when they are deteriorating and the asbestos fibers become airborne.

"When the material itself is building asbestos starts breaking down and starts releasing minute asbestos fibers into the air, that's when problems really start or can occur," Krey said. "If it's in a non-friable, encapsulated state, it's not going to

pose any risk at all."

Although asbestos often was used in the past in such things as roofing shingles, flooring tiles, siding and insulation for hot-water pipes, in most cases the fibers can't easily become airborne because of the nature of the materials, Krey said.

"Usually roofing materials are not a problem because the asbestos is encased with asphalt or tar products," Krey said. "If you're not cutting or sawing it, just tearing the stuff off, generally it's not a problem."

"Thermal pipe insulation is a different story. As the material gets older, the glues and adhesives break down and the asbestos can be more easily released into the air, especially if people brush up against it."

Asbestos fibers cause problems by accumulating in the lungs, Schapiro said. Their chemical properties then cause them to generate chemical compounds that injure healthy lung cells and in doing so may initiate cancer. Smoking increases that risk.

Diseases usually develop a couple of decades or more after exposure.

The likelihood of developing asbestos-related diseases, including lung cancer, is linked to the type of asbestos involved, Schapiro said.

Most of the asbestos fibers used in building products and insulation are a type called chrysotile, he said.

Apparently because of the nature of chrysotile asbestos fibers they are long and curly — there is less chance of them lodging in the lungs and causing problems than amphibole fibers, which are short and straight, Schapiro said.

"People exposed to amphibole or straight fibers are at more risk of asbestos-related diseases," Schapiro said. "That's part of the controversy. Some people think there should be different standards for chrysotile fibers because they probably are less carcinogenic."

"The chances of developing asbestos-related diseases from a one-time exposure are highly unlikely," Schapiro said.

"Some people think it should just be left alone," he said of the controversy about removing asbestos. "Others feel any exposure is too much. My personal opinion is if it's intact and not airborne, I would personally leave it."

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Phoenix unit backs asbestos-cement pipe for drinking water

By Julia Lebowitz
The Arizona Republic

Asbestos-cement pipes that carry water in Phoenix's drinking water are safe, according to a report presented Wednesday by the city's Environmental Quality Commission.

The pipes came under scrutiny last summer when residents saw warning signs on pipes being installed in their central Phoenix neighborhood and questioned their use.

Asbestos is known to cause cancer

when inhaled, but not when ingested, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency. It is used as a strengthening agent in some pipes.

Because of the inhalation danger, the EPA ruled in 1989 that production of asbestos-cement pipe must be discontinued by August 1995.

The commission reviewed the use of the pipe at the request of Councilman Craig Tribble and presented its report to the City Council's natural-resources subcommittee.

"It seems that it's all OK material to use," Tribble said after seeing the report. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep challenging its use and looking for a better way."

The commission concluded that:

- There is no evidence that water delivered through asbestos-cement pipes poses a health risk.
- There is no reason for the city to ban, remove or discontinue the use of the asbestos-cement pipe when following recommended work practices.

from pipe instead of asbestos-cement pipe in areas where pipes are especially subject to leaching.

The city should not consider plastic pipe as an alternative until its potential health risks are investigated further.

There is no health risk to residents or workers handling, installing, storing and disposing of asbestos-cement pipe when following recommended work practices.

Asbestos firms escape payment as Md. loses suit

By Ann Lofardo

After spending six years and \$6 million trying to recover the cost of removing asbestos from public buildings, Maryland walked away from an Anne Arundel County courtroom empty-handed yesterday. A Circuit Court jury, after deliberating for two days, found that three asbestos manufacturers — United States Gypsum Corp., U.S. Mineral Co. and Johns-Manville Corp. — were not liable for the \$17 million cost of removing the hazardous material from almost all of the 28 state buildings involved in the case, said lawyers for the state and the companies.

A total and complete victory, said Thomas F. McDonough, the town's attorney representing the plaintiff, New Jersey-based Asbestos Spry Corp. "We were obviously disappointed," said Assistant Attorney General Markov Treisman, one of the state's lawyers. "It was a complete defense verdict."

This was the only part of the state's original, multimillion-dollar lawsuit from 1984 to be decided by a jury. And the Anne Arundel County jury covered only a fraction of the state facilities in which asbestos has been found.

The state has either voluntarily dismantled other parts of the suit or reached out-of-court settlements with other asbestos manufacturers.

Mr. Treisman said that she could make any last night move such the state had reserved in damages through those actions.

After yesterday's defeat, Mr. Treisman said the state would weigh its options for a possible appeal. But she added, "The state will continue in its effort to keep control of asbestos in its buildings and keep its workers trained in how to safely work with asbestos."

For almost three months, the state has been presenting its case to the Anne Arundel County jury. Lawyers for the two products at issue in the case — spray fireproofing and acoustical ceiling plaster — were dangerous. But the jury found the materials to be not defective or "unreasonably" dangerous, lawyers for both sides said.

"What we've always said is there is a huge difference between heavy-duty occupational exposure like you would have in a shipyard and what happens to somebody who is working in a building where you have these products installed," said George A. Nilsson, the attorney for U.S. Gypsum.

The jurors also could not decide if the manufacturers were negligent in not warning the state of any danger from the asbestos products, said Mr. McDonough, the lawyer for the Asbestos Spry Corp.

MORE BAD NEWS ABOUT ASBESTOS

Fire there were the "tip-and-skip" artists. Now a study finds the majority of over 200 asbestos abatement contractors don't comply with federal fire-safety training and equipment requirements at their job sites. The survey from Fidelity Environmental Insurance Co., Princeton, N.J., documented 42 fires at asbestos abatement sites in 10 states and China last over the last nine years. At least two fires each caused over \$100 million in property damage, but contractors did not have sufficient understanding of fire-safety precautions.

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Lynda Robinson of The Sun's metropolitan staff contributed to this article.