

PREVENTING ASBESTOS DISEASE AMONG AUTO MECHANICS

I. MECHANICS' EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS

Friction materials, such as brake linings and clutch facings, often contain asbestos. Millions of asbestos fibers can be released during brake and clutch servicing (1-8). Grinding and bevelling friction products can cause even higher exposures (1,8). Like germs, asbestos fibers are small enough to be invisible and they can remain and accumulate in the lungs. When you see a dust cloud during brake work, you are seeing clumps containing thousands of fibers. Most of the smaller fibers will not show up with the methods commonly used for measuring asbestos levels in the air, such as the method used to determine compliance with the OSHA asbestos standard, since most asbestos fibers in brake dust are too small to be measured by these methods (1-3,5-8).

Asbestos released into the air lingers around a garage long after a brake job is done and can be breathed in by everyone inside a garage, including customers. While lowering exposure lowers risk, there is no known level of exposure to asbestos below which health effects do not occur (9-12). The EPA has proposed phasing out the use of asbestos products. In situations where asbestos exposures cannot be eliminated entirely, they should be reduced to the lowest possible level (9,13).

Asbestos can be carried on work clothing, contaminating the family car and home. This can cause asbestos disease among family members. An ordinary house vacuum cleaner cannot collect these asbestos fibers, since its filter is not fine enough to trap them. In fact, an ordinary house vacuum cleaner is likely to stir these fibers up and scatter them into the air.

Asbestos can also get on a mechanic's hands and be swallowed when eating or smoking a cigarette. This is a particularly difficult problem for mechanics, since they often get grease on their hands and asbestos fibers can stick to the grease.

II. HEALTH EFFECTS OF ASBESTOS EXPOSURE

Until the use of asbestos products is phased out, the best way of limiting health damage to workers exposed to asbestos is to