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Spackling may harbor dangerous asbestos level

By FRANCES CERRA
New York Times Service

NEW YORK — Doit-yourselfers who repair their own plaster or plasterboard walls should be aware of recent research indicating that some commonly available spackling compounds contain asbestos, a substance that has been linked to fatal cancers and serious lung diseases.

The Environmental Sciences Laboratory at Manhattan's Mount Sinai Hospital under the direction of Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, recently released the results of tests of 15 kinds of spackle that had been purchased in New York City. Five were found to contain appreciable amounts of asbestos. (Some of the samples were duplicate brands bought at different times.)

According to Dr. Selikoff, the union of Drywall Tapers and Painters of Greater New York called his attention to the possibility that the spackle might contain asbestos. John Alfarone, an official of the union, said some of the members became ill and were found to be suffering from asbestos-caused diseases.

AS A RESULT of Dr. Selikoff's findings, he said, his union members will no longer work with any spackle that contains asbestos, and will only sand the dried spackle if they are provided with masks. The asbestos in spackle is released into the air, according to Dr. Selikoff, when the dry forms are mixed with water to make a paste and when any form of spackle is sanded.

Dr. David Rall, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, said it was doubtful that someone doing a small amount of sparkling work at home was in any danger. But he said that someone redoing the walls of an entire house might be taking "an unnecessary risk."

Extensive research on the results of long-range, low-level asbestos exposure is in progress, he said.

A spokesman for U.S. Gypsum, the manufacturer of one of the spackling brands found to contain asbestos, said the company was phasing out the production of spackles with asbestos. A spot check of several Manhattan paint stores found cans of U.S. Gypsum's Texolite, which contains from 6 to 10 percent asbestos, still on the market. Also found was another U.S. Gypsum product called Durabond Paste Spackling, which was labeled: "Caution: Contains asbestos fibers. Avoid creating dust. Breathing asbestos dust may cause serious bodily harm."

THE OTHER PRODUCTS found by Dr. Selikoff to contain asbestos were Perf A Tape, Metro and Arvon. The Perf A Tape was counted twice by Dr. Selikoff, because it was purchased and tested twice, only in 1972 or earlier, and later in January, 1974. Products found to be without asbestos were Red Top, Muralo, Patch Paste, Schalk, U-G-L Cerfex Kex, New Kex and Dap. Dr. Selikoff cautioned that the products on the market today might contain different ingredients.

Persons wishing to minimize any risk should use only paste spackle and should wear a mask when sanding. Most labels on spackle products do not disclose the constituents that went into them.

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