

How asbestos can turn killer around the home

By Oliver Gillie and David May

HOUSEHOLDERS are to be warned that asbestos can be a danger in the home as well as in the factory. The warning, from the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection, will point out that asbestos dust in the home can cause serious lung disease—asbestosis and cancer.

After an eight-year delay, the department has now agreed with asbestos manufacturers and users that all asbestos products will carry a warning label. It is the first time a danger to the general public has been officially recognised.

The hazards of asbestos might affect almost anyone:

- The handyman—dust from sawing and drilling asbestos sheet.
- The motor mechanic—dust from brake and clutch drums.
- Office workers and school-children—disintegrating asbestos spread by ventilation systems.
- Construction and demolition workers—dusty work through disregard of Safety at Work laws.
- Even the housewife—a possible danger from worn ironing pads and oven fittings.

Britain imports 172,000 tonnes of asbestos fibre every year; about half is made into building materials—such as insulation board, tiles, paint and asbestos cement products.

Dr Muriel Newhouse, of the TUC Centenary Institute of Occupational Hygiene, who is an authority on asbestos diseases, says: "There is a real danger of cancer for do-it-yourself workers who use a lot of asbestos."

When asbestos dust is inhaled, it may cause two diseases. One, a long-term hazard, is asbestosis, a formation of scar tissue on the lung which often leads to premature death. The other, liable to result from much shorter-term exposure, is a type of cancer called mesothelioma, which is fatal.

Exposure can also increase susceptibility to common lung cancer and cancer of the bowel. In the latter case, the danger may arise when asbestos is swallowed.

All types of asbestos, not just the notorious blue type, may cause cancer, but there is usually a delay of some 10 to 25 years after exposure to asbestos before the cancer is apparent.

No one knows how little exposure to asbestos may bring

a cancer risk; it may be that, like radiation, any exposure carries some risk.

Mesothelioma is most commonly found among shipworkers (who use quantities of the material) asbestos factory workers and insulation workers who are exposed to asbestos in their jobs, but a number of people who lived near asbestos factories or shipyards, though without ever working in them, have also died from the disease.

In fact, people exposed to asbestos dust for as short a period as a day may be at risk. One man who spent a day sawing up asbestos cement sheets, to make two sheds, suffered mesothelioma some 50 years later. Another victim, it transpired, had merely handled her brother's overalls when they were contaminated with asbestos.

Any doubts that asbestos dust is to blame for such cases are dispelled by experiments conducted by the Medical Research Council Pneumoconiosis Research Unit at Penarth, South Wales. The experiments have shown that mice exposed to blue or white asbestos dust for as little as a day, in conditions equivalent to uncontrolled human exposure, have developed mesothelioma.

The other principal hazard, asbestosis, has also been found in people who have been exposed during do-it-yourself projects. One Irish couple developed the disease after building two bungalows using a large amount of asbestos sheeting. The wife held the sheets while her husband sawed them. They then lived in one of the bungalows

for two years before painting the walls.

The increased risk of common lung cancer in people exposed to asbestos is particularly acute if they smoke. "Smoking and asbestos is a death certificate. It increases the risk of lung cancer 90 times," says Professor Donald Bowes, a Glasgow ecologist who has made a special study of asbestos risks.

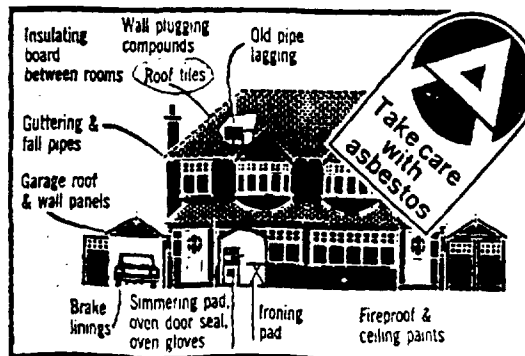
"If simple precautions are taken, contamination can be prevented," he adds. "The dust that you can feel when you breathe in is not the real problem. It is the fine invisible dust that gets to the bottom of the lungs that causes the health problems. This dust is carried on the wind and anyone living downwind from a factory or shipyard could be at risk."

The Home Office was first warned of the danger of asbestos dust from do-it-yourself products in 1968, in a report from the Standing Medical Committee of the Department of Health; but nothing was done.

Early in 1972, the Advisory Committee on Cancer of the Department of Health repeated the warning: "Materials containing asbestos that are sold for domestic building and workshop use should, where practicable, be clearly marked as containing asbestos."

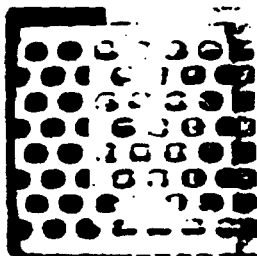
Finally, after yet another report in 1974, this time from the laboratory of the government chemist, the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection (formed in part from the Home Office's home safety section) began negotiating a warning system with the Asbestos Information

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Where the peril from asbestos can lurk unsuspected

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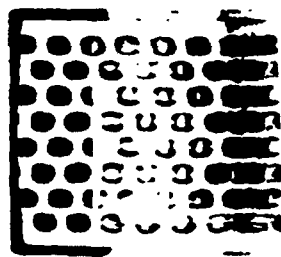


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APR 12 1976

THE SUNDAY TIMES
APRIL 4, 1976

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