Asbestos Is Seen Taking 2,000 Lives

Asbestos, which can protect man from destruction by fire and heat, is also in its own right, a killer. It is believed to be a factor in about 2,000 deaths yearly, according to an article in the December Bulletin of the National Tuberculosis and Respiratory Disease Association (NTRDA).

Inhalation of asbestos, a large group of minerals which are impervious to fire, can cause an occupational respiratory disease known as asbestosis, and is associated with development of certain cancers of the respiratory and digestive systems. Approximately 200,000 workers in this country who are directly involved in the production and installation of asbestos products, if not properly protected, face a threat to their health. Another three to five million who handle products made from asbestos face a lesser risk. Even wives of workers may be exposed to fibers which have settled in their husbands' workclothes.

Asbestos fibers having the smallest diameters pose the greatest danger, as they are more likely to escape the cleaning mechanisms of the upper respiratory tract and lodge in the small airways (bronchioli) of the lungs. Once there, they cause an irritation that leads to the formation of scar tissue. Continued exposure to the fibers increases the scar formation, resulting in breathing difficulties. First apparent as shortness of breath, asbestosis may develop into serious impairment of lung function and finally progress to right-heart failure.

A possible synergistic effect of asbestos and cigarette smoking was suggested by the finding that of 370 insulation workers, there were 42 deaths from lung cancer among smokers and only one among non-smokers. Likewise, five smokers died of mesothelioma of the pluera, a disease of the membrane which covers the chest cavity, while no non-smokers were affected.

Prevention is the best safeguard. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), established by Congress in 1971, selected asbestos for the first of its recommended standards to remove occupational exposure to safety and health hazards. The standards limit the amount of asbestos fibers permitted in work area air. NIOSH also recommends periodic chest x-rays and pulmonary function tests for exposed workers, proper ventilation and, in high risk areas, protective face masks.

Because of the wide use of asbestos and its value to man, its use cannot be eliminated. But with proper safeguards and continued research into the prevention and treatment of asbestosis its threat to health can be kept to a minimum.

Robert J. Anderson, M.D., managing director of NTRDA, says the Christmas Seal organization has been active in supporting protective legislation and disseminating information on occupational respiratory hazards.

"Early in this century the organization pioneered efforts against environmental conditions that fostered the spread of tuberculosis," Dr. Anderson said, "now it must strive for work environments which do not present hazards of lung disease for workers." The nationwide resources of NTRDA make it the ideal organization to continue efforts toward this end.

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