PA-00265

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Brake Lining Decomposition Products

A number of investigators have found asbestos bodies in the lungs of urban residents who were not occupationally exposed to asbestos. A relationship between the carinogenic properties of asbestos and the urban excess of lung cancer has been suggested. The decomposition products of brake linings have been described as a possible source of these fibers. Brake testing laboratory methods were used to test fiber emission from a variety of friction products. Only a very small fraction of the asbestos escaped as free fiber while the remainder was transformed into some other, nonfibrous, mineral. A significant release of free fiber occurred only under conditions extreme enough to produce brake failure.

Table I. Asbestos bodies in human lungs.

Location	Year	% Positive
Cape Town (2)	1953	26
Miami (2)	1965	27
Pittsburgh (3)	1966	41
Johannesburg (4)	1955	39
Finland (5)	1966	58
Montreal (6)	1966	48
San Francisco (1)	1966	42

Table II. Brake lining composition.

Ingredient	Automobile	Truck
Asbestos	55	33
Resins and polymers	28	48
Oxides and pigments	9	16
Metals	3	2
Carbon, graphite, etc.	5	1
	100%	100%

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The occurrence of coated fibers referred to as "asbestos bodies" in the lungs of urban populations not occupationally exposed to asbestos has been noted by several investigators. The results of several autopsy series, as summarized by Cooper,[1] are shown in Table I.[1-6] Thompson,[7] in suggesting possible modes of exposure that could account for these bodies, stated:

> The average private motor vehicle wears out three or four sets of brake linings and one or two clutch linings in its lifetime, and commercial and public transport vehicles wear out many more. These linings consist largely of asbestos which is ground to dust as the linings wear, and most wear occurs in built-up areas. This alone in most cities would involve the discharge of many tons of asbestos dust and fibers in the streets each year.

Since asbestos has been implicated as a carcinogen[8] and lung cancer has a higher incidence[9] among urban populations, the fate of the asbestos worn from brake linings becomes significant.

Brake Lining Composition

The average composition of typical brake linings of the type tested is shown in Table II. Individual mixes may vary considerably from these averages.

Each of these ingredients performs a particular function. The asbestos provides strength, heat resistance, and selective decomposition under stress. The resins and polymers hold the other ingredients together. Various oxides are added as pigments and to improve the grip of the lining on the drum. Soft metals such as lead and brass improve wear while carbon and graphite serve as friction modifiers.

Brake lining quality depends to a large extent on the type of binder used. Linseed oil, which begins to decompose at about 450°F, is used for light service brakes. More demanding service requires brakes made from cashew type resins or oil modified phenolic resins. These ingredients are mixed, either dry or with a solvent added, formed into shape, and cured in an oven. The hardened lining is then cut, ground, and sanded to the precise dimensions of the finished linings. The dust produced by the abrading operations in asbestos friction product factories (Figure 1) contains free asbestos fibers that are similar to those in industries where cancer is known to be in excess.[10] The question to be resolved, therefore, is whether the dust produced by the normal wear of brake linings contains this same type of free asbestos fiber.

Test Methods

In an initial exploratory survey, the dust obtained from inside automobile brake drums removed for brake relining was examined by electron micrograph. Figure 2, which is typical of the series, does not reveal any free fibers. However, this finding did not eliminate the possibility that free asbestos fibers were released and that they had escaped into the atmosphere. To examine this hypothesis a series of experiments was devised to permit sampling decomposition products of the lining under simulated operating conditions. The tests (Table III) were performed with the brake testing machines in the laboratory of a major brake lining manufacturer. Most of the tests were performed on a

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