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Suspect Asbestos as Medical Specialists a Cause of Cancer

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AP Science Writer

NEW YORK — Medical specialists pointed a strong finger of suspicion today at asbestos as a cause not only of lung cancer but also of another extremely rare form of fatal human cancer.

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This cancer, known as mesothelioma, involves the lining of the abdominal and chest cavities.

Much of the specialists' evidence comes from autopsy studies of men working with asbestos as an insulation material.

They said it also is possible that dust from products containing asbestos might be exposing people generally to some risk of cancers. How much risk there might be, they said, they could not tell.

FLOORING MATERIAL

Asbestos is used not only for insulation but as a flooring material, in automobile brake shoes, and in many other applications. Ordinary wear and tear, they said, might release dust into the atmosphere.

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The report was presented to the American Public Health Association by Drs. Irving J. Selikoff and Jacob Churg of the Mount Sinai Hospital, New York, and E. Cuyler Hammond, Sc.D., director of statistical research for the American Cancer Society. Dr. Hammond is known for his studies of cigarette smoking in relationship to lung cancer.

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Asbestos is a mineral, magnesium silicate, and about 3½ million tons of it are used worldwide each year, they said. In 1935, worldwide usage amounted to about 500 tons, the researchers said.

Tiny, hard particles of asbestos can lodge in the lungs during mining, processing and application of asbestos-containing materials, or possibly from dust raised through normal wear, they said.

MARKED INCREASE

"We had previously found that lung cancer and possibly gastrointestinal cancer were markedly increased in incidence among asbestos insulation workers," they said.

Now they also find a markedly high increase among such workers of mesothelioma, a cancer so rare it is not classed separately as a cause of death in the international classification of diseases.

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As a prime example, they reported finding 10 deaths due to this form of cancer in a study of 307 deaths among New York and New Jersey building trades union members engaged in using asbestos at least occasionally as an insulation material.

By contrast, this form of cancer was found to be the cause of death among only three out of more than 30,000 autopsies in a study of the general population sponsored by the American Cancer Society.

HIGH INCIDENCE

Other studies showed a high incidence not only of lung cancer but mesotheliomas among persons who had asbestos particles in their lungs at the time of their deaths, they said.

"It would appear that mesothelioma must be added to the neoplastic (cancer) risks of asbestos inhalation and joins lung cancer (53 out of 307 deaths) and probably cancer of the stomach and colon (34 of 307 deaths) as a significant complication of such industrial exposure in the United States," their report said.

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The cancers may not appear until 20 to 30 years after asbestos dust is inhaled or swallowed, they said. Since the particles do not dissolve, they may remain in body tissue as a continuous source that might incite ultimate cancer.

Dr. Hammond said one worry is whether a few or even a single past exposure might set the stage for cancer. He said this is a matter calling for more research.

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Taking precautions to avoid breathing in asbestos dust is a main protection for industrial workers, he and Dr. Selikoff said.

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