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Unfortunately, this is not the case. Despite commercial availability of asbestos-free substitutes in every major application, the use of asbestos continues to be permitted, even for products no longer made in the U.S. with asbestos but still imported from other countries. Equally worrisome is the lack of control over exposures from the deterioration of asbestos-containing materials already in place.

Continuing Asbestos Exposure in the United States

U.S. consumption of asbestos fiber has dropped dramatically from the peak level of 1974, most markedly in the 1980s. (See Fig. 1) Little of this has been offset by increased imports of asbestos products.

By 1980, asbestos-free brakes, packings, gaskets, fireproof textiles, and plastics were making significant penetration in historic asbestos product markets.[5-7] Asbestos use in molded insulation and drywall patching compounds had been specifically forbidden by government regulation.[8,9] Other uses such as in tobacco products, gas mask filters, dish towels, air-dropped forest fire retardants, grinding wheels, and open-heart surgery have apparently been abandoned as inappropriate. Many others among the still-numerous uses of asbestos have lost markets despite the lack of specific product bans affecting them. Local governments are turning to alternatives for asbestos-cement pipes for drinking water supplies and other uses, and at least six asbestos-cement pipe manufacturing plants in North America have been closed.[10-12] OSHA and EPA standards, workers' compensation and product liability considerations, and widespread public concern have all been factors in these market shifts.

Where stiff, durable, fibrous materials of respirable dimensions have been used in place of asbestos, there is concern about a mesothelioma risk. These apprehensions have been supported by experimental data since 1972.[13] One alternative, potassium titanate fiber, developed by DuPont, was abandoned after animal testing showed it could cause mesothelioma by inhalation.[14] Testing and prospective epidemiological study continue, and asbestos fiber substitutes