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U.S. asked to ban asbestos in food and drink processing

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Washington—Millions of Americans may be gradually poisoning themselves by swallowing food, beverages and drugs contaminated with cancer-causing asbestos fibers, according to a petition to be filed tomorrow with the Federal Food and Drug Administration.

Asbestos fibers find their way into rice, peanuts, salami and other foods from the commercial talcs used in processing, according to the petition, prepared by the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the Environmental Defense Fund.

Gin, beer, fruit juice

The two nonprofit, public-interest groups also claim that such beverages as gin, beer, and fruit juices are contaminated with asbestos from the filters used to purify them.

Lung cancer, cancer of the digestive tract and other fatal diseases have been shown to result from exposure to asbestos, through swallowing as well as through inhaling, the petition states.

The petition demands that the Food and Drug Administration ban the use of asbestos filters and the use of talc in food processing, charging the agency with "delays, false promises [and] obfuscation" in dealing with past calls for action.

Albert J. Fritsch, a director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, promised yesterday that the groups will take the FDA to court if it fails to satisfy the demands in the petition.

"A critical dose"

"Millions of Americans may already have received a critical dose of asbestos fibers not merely through the air they breathe but through their food and drugs," the petition states.

"The seriousness of the consequences and the absence of a known safe level make it imperative, therefore, that human exposure from all known sources be reduced to an absolute minimum."

An FDA ban is already in effect on the use of asbestos in manufacturing clothing, and the agency has had before it since last August a proposed regulation forbidding the use of food additives that contain asbestos, according to the petition.

Develops slowly

Cancer induced by asbestos develops slowly, the petition asserts, so that those exposed to asbestos may be killed by it after decades of apparent good health.

While admitting that the effects of eating peanuts treated with talc and drinking beer filtered through asbstos have not been established with any precision, the petition claims that cancer is rampant among asbestos workers who have been heavily exposed.

Asbestos filters are in use in the manufacture of almost all kinds of beverages, but other materials can be substituted easily, according to the 24-page document

Talc, which according to the petition is often contaminated with asbestos, is used in making pills and tablets, in molding candy, in packaging dry foods and as a chewing-gum base.