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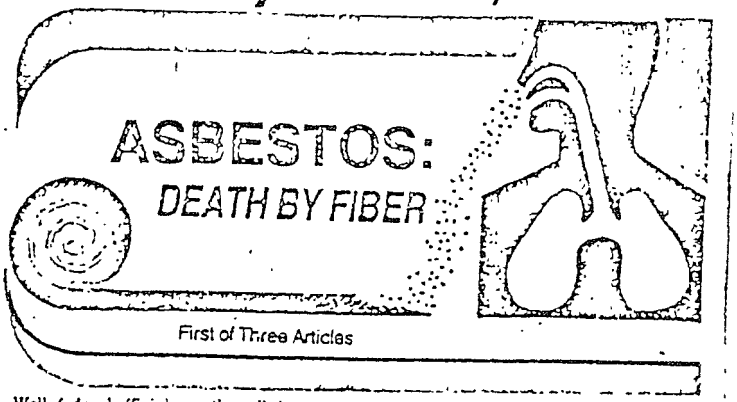
Millions Infected by Cruel, Patient Killer

By Rick Lyman
A Member of the Staff

It's Sunday morning, time for a little quiz. What do the following people have in common?

- Your uncle who was a shipbuilder during World War II.
- Your aunt who washed his clothes.
- Your sister who visited them on weekends.
- Your father who worked, even if only for one day long ago, in an insulation factory.
- Your brother who grinds and fits his own brake linings.
- Your child who goes to school in an old building where the insulation is flaking off.
- You, just for being around the rest of them.

Give up?



Well, federal officials say they all share a risk much higher than the average person of developing either asbestosis—also known as "white lung"—or cancer of the lungs, rectum, colon or stomach.

Asbestos is the key ingredient here. Authorities are convinced that it can be dangerous—can even kill.

Federal officials this year estimated that as many as 5.6 million workers could die from cancer or other disease as a direct result of their exposure to asbestos.

And it's a cruel and unusual killer, they charge, because the disease doesn't even show up until anywhere from 15 to 40 years after exposure. A person could breathe asbestos fibers and decades later develop a tumor or a lung ailment.

It can happen, scientists say. It's happening now, to hundreds of thousands of Americans.

Although there is unanimity in the belief that exposure to asbestos can contribute to the later development of cancer and asbestosis, some scientists and industry officials disagree with the alarming government sta-

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☆Asbestos Restrictions Too Late for Many

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tistics.

There are too many factors in the development of a cancer to single out asbestos as the primary cause, they say.

Government and industry officials believe they have most of the problem under control—for the future. Asbestos is no longer being widely used as an insulator, and most of its current applications are considered safe because the fibers are effectively sealed and can't escape, float around and end up in your lungs.

But there are fears that problems will crop up from its past use. Millions of people who were exposed to the fibers before their danger was widely known are only now entering the critical period when the illness is most likely to develop.

Thousands of buildings that do have asbestos insulation—constructed back when it was considered safe and practical—are now starting to deteriorate. Tiny particles of asbestos, flaking away from the building's insulation as its adhesive corrodes, are floating into the atmosphere and into the lungs of workers, shoppers and schoolchildren.

Asbestos is described by the National Safety Council as a "hydrated magnesium silicate in fibrous form." Among toxic substances it is classified as a "pneumonoconiosis-producing dust."

That means the tiny asbestos fibers lodge in the lungs and remain there forever, grinding away at the lung tissue. They can scar the lungs, causing asbestosis, or they can increase the body's susceptibility to cancer. Recently it has been shown that the fibers also can lodge in the stomach or intestines, or pass through the bloodstream and lodge in the body's inner lining.

In each case, asbestos is a stubborn menace, refusing to deteriorate or pass away and significantly increasing the risk of cancer, according to several research studies.

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) says there is "conclusive evidence that exposure to asbestos fibers causes cancer and asbestosis in man."

NIOSH, an agency within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare that does research on work-related issues of safety and health, also concluded that there is no such thing as a "safe" level of asbestos fibers.

The Asbestos Workers Union, headquartered in Washington, has long been aware of what it considers to be the dangers of asbestos. They charge that the asbestos industry also knew of the dangers as long as 50 years ago and covered them up until conclusive medical research was released in 1964.

The union now is seeking national legislation banning asbestos, charging that safer alternatives are readily available. The union also is battling to force the asbestos industry to aid workers who have been stricken by cancer or asbestosis.

Hundreds of lawsuits have been filed by former asbestos workers, now stricken, who seek compensation or aid in paying their medical bills. At least one class-action suit is asking the court to force an asbestos company to relinquish every cent of profit it has ever made on asbestos.

For their part, industry officials say they were aware of some evidence of health risks over the decades—but no conclusive medical evidence was available. Now that the evidence has surfaced, alternative forms of insulation are being produced. The asbestos being produced and sold today is well within federal regulations, they say, safely prevented from escaping into the atmosphere by a layer of sealant.

While asbestos has not been outlawed, a number of regulations now govern its use.

The Environmental Protection Agency has rules specifying what precautions must be taken when an old building containing asbestos insulation is torn down—to prevent the wind from carrying the deadly fibers into the lungs of passersby.

Also, the EPA has ruled that the level of asbestos in construction materials must be lower than 1 percent.

The Food and Drug Administration doesn't want to see asbestos showing up in food.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission has banned at least two products that contained asbestos—a filler used to repair cracks and chips in plaster or dry wall and asbestos-treated fireplace logs.

Monday In The Star: A brief history of when and where asbestos has been used, when the first signs of health hazards appeared and what the intervening years of research have shown.

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