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DR. BRANDSTADT'S COLUMN

Asbestos Inhalation

Because of the surprisingly varied uses to which asbestos has been put, there is a growing interest among doctors in the lung disease called asbestosis. This is one of a group of diseases of the lungs caused by the inhalation of various dusts. In asbestosis, the inhalation of asbestos dust over a period of years causes permanent deposits in the lungs of needlelike asbestos crystals. The irritation they produce is mechanical rather than chemical and the result is fibrosis or scarring of the lungs.

This in itself can be serious, but even more serious is the fact that the victims have a death rate from lung cancer eight times that of men who are not exposed to the dust. Their death rate from cancer of the digestive tract is also higher than the expected rate. A further study revealed that among asbestos workers, those who smoke cigarettes have a death rate from lung cancer 92 times as great as that of men who neither smoke nor work with asbestos.

In addition to asbestos weavers, those in danger include auto mechanics, brake manufacturers, carpenters, clutch manufacturers, filter makers, manufacturers of floor tiling, insulators, miners, roofers, shingle makers, shipbuilders and steam fitters. Even "sidewalk engineers" who enjoy watching new skyscrapers go up are at some risk because appreciable amounts of asbestos, though not visible to the naked eye, have been shown to be present in the surrounding air at these locations. And children are not immune to the danger. Some kindergartens have been known to supply raw asbestos for tots to mix with water to make "dough."

Unlike the usual case of tuberculosis, the lesions caused by the inhalation of dust are not localized but are diffused throughout the lungs. Since there is no effective treatment for asbestosis, prevention is essential. All workers with asbestos in any form should be protected by well-constructed vents to carry the dust away or they should wear respirators. Those who smoke should quit and those who don't should never start.

(Newspaper Enterprise Assn.)

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Asbestos Safeguards

Because of the number of respiratory conditions caused by contact with asbestos, the British government is drawing up new regulations to better protect persons working with this material.