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OSHA ESTABLISHES NEW STANDARD FOR EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS DUST

A new standard for employee exposure to asbestos dust, limiting concentrations to 2 fibers, which are longer than 5 micrometers, per cubic centimeter of air on a time-weighted average, effective July 1, 1976, was announced today by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

The current permissible time-weighted average concentration of 5 fibers of asbestos longer than 5 micrometers, established originally in an emergency temporary standard last December 7, will be continued until July 1, 1976.

The standard also establishes a ceiling concentration of 10 fibers, not to be exceeded at any time.

George C. Guenther, Assistant Secretary of Labor for OSHA, said the new standard was adopted after consideration of recommendations from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; of the OSHA Advisory Committee on Asbestos Dust, and of comments from interested persons, including presentations in a four-day public hearing.

The new standard provides the following:

Acceptable concentrations -- As of July 1, 1976, time-weighted average concentrations of asbestos fibers longer than 5 micrometers will not be allowed to exceed 2 fibers per cubic centimeter of air. The current time-weighted average concentrations of 5 fibers will be permitted until July 1, 1976.

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Methods of compliance -- Feasible technological controls and appropriate work practices are required as the primary means of compliance. Rotation of employees to reduce their exposures is allowed only in "exceptional circumstances." Personal protective equipment, such as respirators, cannot be relied upon, in large part because such devices are so uncomfortable as to be burdensome except for short periods.

The standard includes these other compliance requirements:

-- Hand tools that may produce or release asbestos fibers in excess of the limits must be provided with local exhaust ventilation systems.

-- Insofar as practicable, asbestos must be handled, mixed, applied, removed, cut, scored or otherwise worked in a wet state to reduce fiber emissions unless this would diminish the usefulness of the product.

-- No asbestos cement, mortar, coating, grout, plaster or similar material containing asbestos can be removed from shipping bags or other containers without being either wetted, enclosed or ventilated.

-- Where respirators are permitted, they must be selected from among the types approved by the Bureau of Mines or NIOSH. Extensive details are given on types of respirators and conditions for their use. No employee may be assigned to a task requiring a respirator if a physician determines it would affect his job functioning or his health.

-- The employer must provide and require the use of special protective clothing, change rooms, and two separate lockers for the employee's street and work clothes. The employer also must exercise care in laundering and other handling of contaminated clothing.

-- External work area surfaces must be kept free of excessive accumulations of asbestos fibers. Waste must be collected in sealed, impermeable bags or other such containers.

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Monitoring -- Employers must establish monitoring systems to make certain every employee's exposure to asbestos fibers is below the prescribed limits. If the limits are exceeded, the employer must undertake a compliance program. Therefore, the standard also requires monitoring at intervals no longer than 6 months and gives employees or their representatives the opportunity to observe the monitoring and to have access to such records.

Warning signs -- Caution signs are to be displayed in areas where asbestos concentrations may exceed the exposure limits. Caution labels must be affixed to all raw materials, mixtures, scrap, waste, debris and other products containing asbestos fibers, or to their containers. However, no label is required where asbestos has been modified by a bonding agent, coating, binder or other material that would prevent release of above-limit concentrations.

Recordkeeping -- Employers must maintain records of personal or environmental monitoring, keep them for at least 3 years, and make them available upon request to OSHA or NIOSH. Every current and former employee is given opportunity for reasonable access to any records indicating their exposure to asbestos dust. Any employee found to have been exposed at any time to airborne concentrations in excess of the limits must be notified in writing no later than 5 days after the finding, and informed as to corrective action being taken.

Medical examinations -- The employer must provide, or make available at his cost, medical examinations. Within 30 days of an employee's first employment in a job involving asbestos exposure, the employer must provide a comprehensive medical examination, including a chest X-ray and pulmonary tests. By January 31, 1973, and at least annually thereafter, every employer shall provide or make available comprehensive medical examinations to employees in asbestos exposure areas. A similar examination is to be provided within 30 days before or after termination of employment.

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Medical records -- Employers whose employees have been examined under the standard must maintain complete records of these examinations and retain them for at least 20 years. The contents of the records are to be made available for inspection and copying to the Assistant Secretary of Labor for OSHA, the Director of NIOSH, authorized physicians and medical consultants of either agency, and, upon request of an employee or former employee, to his physician. Any physician who conducts an examination under the standard must furnish the employer all information required by the standard, and any other medical information related to occupational exposure to asbestos fibers.

Affected employment -- This general standard covers also employees in construction, ship repairing, shipbuilding, shipbreaking and longshoring who normally are subject to construction and maritime standards.

All parts of the new standard go into effect July 7 of this year except for the reduction from 5 fibers to 2, which takes effect July 1, 1976. The standards is scheduled for publication in the Federal Register June 7.

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