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OSHA ANNOUNCES SHARP REDUCTION IN PERMISSIBLE WORKER EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS

The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) today announced a sharp reduction in the permissible worker exposure limit (PEL) to asbestos which is expected to lower the death risk by 90 percent among those heavily exposed.

"The hazard of asbestos is well-known and documented," Labor Secretary William E. Brock said. "Two new standards are being promulgated by OSHA which will substantially increase protections for over 1.3 million workers and reduce their risk of cancer and other serious disease."

"By lowering the exposure limit of asbestos and addressing the special problems of the construction industry, these standards reflect our firm commitment to reduce the serious health threat of this particularly dangerous substance," Brock commented.

Newly appointed Assistant Secretary of Labor John A. Pendergrass, who heads OSHA, announced the new standards (one for general industry and a separate one for construction). Pendergrass pointed out that the asbestos construction standard represents the first time OSHA has issued a health standard strictly for the construction industry.

"OSHA constantly seeks new approaches to worker protection and the asbestos construction standard is a positive result of this process," he said. Both standards lower the permissible worker exposure limit to asbestos from the current 2 fibers per cubic centimeter (2 f/cc averaged over an eight-hour day) to 0.2 f/cc.

OSHA estimates that the standards will reduce the excess risk of dying from cancer over a working lifetime from 64 per 1,000 workers at the current 2 f/cc limit to 6.7 per 1,000. The excess risk of developing disabling and sometimes fatal asbestosis is expected to decrease from 50 per 1,000 to 5 per 1,000 workers.

Along with the permissible exposure limit, various monitoring, training and other requirements will now be triggered at lower levels under the new standards (action level of 0.1 f/cc).

The standards also require, for the first time, worker education and training programs to alert employees to the dangers of asbestos and provide information on safe work practices.

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Workers exposed to asbestos are found primarily in the manufacturing, service and construction industries with a total of about 1.3 million workers in these industries who have some exposure above the 0.1 f/cc action level.

The heaviest exposures occur in general building renovation in the construction industry where about 133,700 workers are exposed. As a result, the construction standard has extensive provisions requiring physical barriers to isolate asbestos work and a "competent person" to ensure proper compliance. The standard for construction requires that a "competent person" (i.e. someone capable of identifying existing asbestos hazards with authority to eliminate them) be designated during asbestos removal, demolition, and renovation operations.

About 527,000 workers are in automotive brake and clutch repair establishments, but their average eight-hour exposure ranges from the non-detectable level to 0.94 f/cc.

OSHA estimates that the total annual compliance costs for all the industries affected by the two standards will be about \$460 million annually, roughly \$108 million for general industry and \$352 million for construction. The agency concludes that with two exceptions (i.e. secondary asbestos gasket manufacturing and renovation activities in construction) the revised standards will not have significant economic impact on the industries' viability nor will they have an adverse impact on small firms.

The old standard applies to all industries, both general and construction, but a separate standard is now being promulgated for construction because of the unique characteristics of that industry such as the temporary nature of worksites, the effect of weather variations, and the highly mobile nature of the workforce.

Thus the new standard for general industry applies to all occupational exposures to asbestos except in construction, while the construction standard in addition to general building renovation, covers new construction, asbestos abatement, demolition, and contracted maintenance.

Both standards also require that engineering and work practice controls be used to reach the PEL but the general industry allows the use of respirators in some sanding and grinding operations after a 0.5 f/cc limit is achieved, providing that feasible engineering controls are not sufficient to reduce employee exposure to or below the 0.2 f/cc limit.

Also, medical surveillance is required in general industry if exposure is above the action level. In construction medical surveillance is required if exposure is above the action level for 30 or more days or if negative pressure respirators are worn.

Other provisions, which are similar in both standards, require:

--- Employers to provide respirators to workers exposed above the PEL, to some maintenance workers, and in emergencies.

--- Protective clothing including provisions for replacement, storage, disposal and laundering.

--- Change rooms, showers and lunchrooms when exposures exceed the PEL.

--- Signs, labels and employee training.

--- Specified clean-up and waste disposal methods under housekeeping provisions.

--- Retention of medical and exposure records for a minimum of 30 years.

--- Permission for employees or their representatives to observe the monitoring procedures.

~~Both standards also have the same mandatory appendices detailing OSHA's method for analyzing air samples, qualitative and quantitative fit testing for respirators, medical questionnaires, and the interpretation and classification of chest X-rays.~~

A non-mandatory appendix to the general industry standard provides detailed work practice and engineering control guides for brake repair work to assist auto servicing employers.

In the construction standard, a non-mandatory appendix provides guidelines on work practice and engineering controls for major asbestos removal, renovation work, and demolition. Another appendix includes guidelines for work practice and engineering controls for small-scale, short duration, asbestos removal, renovation, and demolition operations.

~~Identical appendices in both standards cover detailed procedures for asbestos sampling and analysis, substance technical information, and medical surveillance guidelines.~~

The 25 states and territories with their own OSHA-approved job safety and health plans must revise their existing standards within six months of publication or show OSHA that they already have a state standard covering asbestos workers which is "at least as effective" as the federal standards.

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