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Asbestos Found In Ten Powders

Ten out of 19 body and baby powders tested at Mount Sinai Hospital here were contaminated with asbestos fibers capable of causing a rare form of chest and abdominal cancer, researchers have reported.

Dr. Arthur Rohl, who conducted the tests with Dr. Arthur Langer, said of the findings: "There is no firm evidence on low-level or intermittent exposure, such as from using talcum powder. We don't know for sure what the danger level is."

The researchers said the contamination usually was found in the talc used in the powders. Asbestos fibers can cause mesothelioma, a chest and abdominal cancer, and can also result in the scarring of lung tissue and gastro-intestinal difficulties, Dr. Rohl said.

The researchers said that 10 of the 19 American samples contained from 2 percent to 20 percent asbestos fibers with the highest concentration in ZBT Baby Powder with Baby Oil, Cashmere Bouquet Body Talc, Coty Airspun Face Powder and Rosemary Talc range from 8 percent to 20 percent asbestos fibers.

Bauer & Black Baby Talc, which is no longer on the market, had a 15 percent concentration. Other powders containing less than 5 percent asbestos were Fabergé Brut Talc, Yardley Invisible Talc, Yardley Black Label Baby Powder, Mennen Shave Talc and English Leather After Shave Talc.

The manufacturers that could be reached for comment said that they were convinced that their products were safe and that their own tests had shown no asbestos. Only the manufacturer of Rosemary could not be reached.

The products that the researchers found uncontaminated with asbestos fibers were Ammen's Medicated Powder, Avon Bird of Paradise Beauty Dust, Diaperene Medicated Body Powder; two Johnson's Baby Powders (one made here and one in Britain), Johnson's Medicated Powder, Mennen Bath Talc, Yardley After Shave Powder and Yardley Original Body Powder.

The tests at Mt. Sinai, which Federal health officials described as the country's leading research facility looking into the possible dangers of asbestos, used an electron microscope, which Heinz J. Elrmann, director of cosmetics technology in the Food and Drug Administration, said was too expensive and time-consuming for his agency to use.

The experiments at Mt. Sinai, which Dr. Rohl described as the only significant inquiry on the subject ever held, were financed by a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Services and were begun in 1973.