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DO YOU WORK WITH ASBESTOS?

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Do you work with asbestos? It's worth finding out, because asbestos is one of the most serious threats to the health of American workers.

Asbestos can be found at construction sites, shipyards, textile and chemical plants, auto repair shops, schools, paper mills, and many other workplaces. It can travel from one part of a work area to another through ventilation systems. It can be inhaled or swallowed with food.

In all, three to five million workers may be exposed to asbestos. Studies have shown that more than 40 percent of asbestos workers will die of asbestos-related diseases. Even very brief exposure may cause a deadly lung disease or cancer which may not show up for 20 years or more. Other studies have shown that 38 percent of asbestos workers' family members may suffer lung disorders, apparently as a result of exposure to fibers which are brought home on work clothes.

There is no known safe level for exposure to asbestos, so it is important that your employer reduce your exposure as much as possible. The standard issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires your employer to limit average exposure over an 8-hour shift to two asbestos fibers longer than five micrometers in each cubic centimeter of air.

To meet this standard, employers must use engineering controls. These may include isolation and enclosure of work processes, exhaust ventilation systems, and dust collection. All hand-operated and power-operated tools which might release asbestos must be equipped with local exhaust systems. As far as possible, asbestos must be kept wet when being handled.

Employers must provide approved respirators while changes are being made to reduce exposure, or if otherwise necessary. Workers who can't function normally when wearing a respirator may not be assigned to tasks which require respirator use. Employers must also provide change rooms, two separate clothes lockers, and laundry service so that asbestos fibers will not be transferred to street clothes.

At workplaces where asbestos is present, employers must conduct tests at least every six months to determine asbestos exposure levels. They also must provide regular medical examinations. Workers have the right to see their exposure records, and to have their medical records made available to their doctors.

If you have questions about asbestos and the OSHA asbestos standard, contact the nearest OSHA office. Look in your phone book under "United States Government, Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration," or write to OSHA, 3rd and Constitution Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210.