Asbestos and Health

Questions & Answers

Recent public discussion of the health implications of asbestos dust has led to a number of erroneous and misleading impressions about hazards associated with the use of asbestos. These impressions are based on the unwarranted assumption that data on occupational health risks associated with heavy, long term asbestos exposure can also be applied to the general public.

The known medical facts, supported by nearly a half century of studies and research, are that:

1. Asbestos-related health risks are basically confined to the occupational and para-occupational setting.
2. Asbestos-related diseases may develop, generally, only after the inhalation of substantial amounts of asbestos dust for a substantial period of time.
3. There is presently no evidence of hazard to the general public from exposure to the minute amounts of asbestos that may be present in community air.

Following are some questions commonly asked about asbestos and health. Answers are based on known scientific evidence and industry experience.

Q Is asbestos a major air pollutant?

A Dust counts taken in New York City and other urban areas show that asbestos levels in the community air are many times lower than levels considered to be safe for occupational exposure. In addition, recent evidence indicates that small quantities of asbestos fiber from natural sources may have existed in the ambient air for perhaps thousands or even millions of years. Man thus probably evolved into his present form in an atmosphere containing some asbestos.

Q Do brake linings emit much asbestos into the air?

A A United States Public Health Service study shows that only a tiny fraction of the asbestos in brake linings is released to the air in its original form when brakes are applied. The rest is converted into fosterite—a non-fibrous inert material—by the heat of friction.

Q Does the use of asbestos cause disease in the general public?

A There is no evidence, scientific or otherwise, that anyone in the general public has ever contracted any disease from exposure to the minute amounts of asbestos released into community air through the use, application, or wearing and weathering of finished asbestos products.

Q Can a little bit of asbestos kill you?

A Long-term medical studies of occupationally exposed workers show that low to moderate levels of exposure to asbestos do not lead to an increased rate of disease. In these studies, a higher than normal incidence of disease was found only among employees exposed to high concentrations of dust for long periods of time.

Q Once asbestos enters the lung, does all of it remain there forever?

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