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Press

WHO

IARC

ASBESTOS AND CANCER - A NEW EVALUATION

All commercial forms of asbestos have been shown to be carcinogenic in mice, rats, hamsters and rabbits. Human occupational exposure to all commercial forms of asbestos has resulted in a high incidence of lung cancer and mesotheliomas. These were the main conclusions of the working group[1] convened by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, which met here for five days, 13-17 December 1976.

During the first part of the meeting the group vetted all available data already published in scientific journals dealing with asbestos and cancer. They compared and collated the reports dealing with animal experimentation on the one hand and those relating to human exposure to asbestos fibres on the other.

The experimental data showed a wide measure of agreement between laboratories in different countries with a variety of tumours in lung and pleura being found after asbestos fibres had been injected or inhaled. One laboratory reported tumours in rats whose feed contained asbestos filter material.

Men employed in the asbestos industry have been shown to have a high incidence of lung cancers, mesotheliomas (cancer of the pleura and peritoneum) and, to a lesser extent, gastro-intestinal tract tumours. These include asbestos miners, men employed in various parts of the processing industries and those working on building sites and shipyards where asbestos is used in many forms. Garage mechanics carrying out repairs on brake linings are also at risk. The group noted reports of mesotheliomas occurring in individuals living in the vicinity of asbestos factories.

Exposed workers were liable to increased lung cancer incidence whether or not they smoked; if they smoked, the two factors acted in a multiplicative way producing an extremely high lung cancer risk.

Concern was also shown by the group about the reports that the general population may also be exposed to asbestos fibres in beverages, drinking water, food, pharmaceutical and dental products and through consumer use of asbestos-containing products. Although abundant evidence exists of the carcinogenicity to man of inhaled asbestos fibres, there is no evidence at present that ingested asbestos fibres are carcinogenic to man. However, the group concluded that "at present it is not possible to assess whether there is a level of exposure to asbestos in humans below which an increased risk of cancer would not occur"

[illegible] list of names

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