Living Safely with Asbestos
All You Need to Know about Asbestos

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Most every one knows by now that asbestos fibers, when inhaled, can cause lung disease, even cancer. So, why not just simply do away with it, purge it from the environment? Why keep living with the enemy?

Hold on though, it's not that simple; and perchance, not even necessary.

Asbestos is a Greek word that means "unquenchable." The Greeks had it backward for in truth it is nonflammable, and that is what makes it so valuable. It won't ignite and it transmits heat and cold reluctantly. Fire proofing and sound absorption properties fit it nicely for the structures in which we live, work and play. It gives strength to cement and plastics. Imagine its worth around boilers, steampipes and nuclear reactors. Asbestos slows and stops our cars when used in brake shoes and clutch pads. Presently, industry employs asbestos in more than 5000 products. Any problems with all that? Let's take a look.

The trouble with asbestos is its fibers. Tiny as they are, they have a noxious habit of fragmenting easily, of floating in air or adhering to clothing. Inhaled and swallowed they exact a pernicious toll on human well-being. For instance, take the lungs. Once these fibers are inhaled they are liable to lodge deep within the alveoli. Persistent cough along with shortness of breath suggest lung damage (asbestosis). Not good. But then consider lung cancer. And cancer of the voice box---the larynx. Add to that, cancer of the intestinal tract and ovary. Can asbestos do all that? Fortunately these cancer cases are uncommon; but real, persuasive and deadly.

Then there is mesothelioma, another tumor, this time of the delicate membranes that wrap the lungs and line the walls of the chest and abdomen. World War 11 drew about 4 million men and women into shipyards where the exposure to asbestos was intense---all those pipes and boilers that required insulation by asbestos. We can hope that for them the dangers are long past.

Are you ready for some better asbestos news? We are using less of it, much less, for in the decade from 1980 to 1990 the tonnage dropped from 560,000 to (about) 55,000 metric tons. That's a lot less asbestos lurking around.

The tidings get better yet---non-smokers are only rarely affected by asbestos. Lung cancer occurs about ten times more often in smokers than those who shun tobacco. Smokers should quit this very day. This goes for family members of exposed workers, for it seems that those skulking fibers hitch rides home on shoes, clothing, even hair. Don't smoke.

And what about those ceiling panels and tiles, and pipes in homes and schools and offices? Many experts believe that these, when bonded in with paint and the like are safe unless disturbed.
Perhaps the millions that we have already expended to pull out the panels and tiles in our schools might have been used elsewhere more effectively. Like teaching our kids to read, write and reckon.

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