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Dr. Frank is an internationally recognized physician, educator and researcher with a special focus on the impact of asbestos exposure. He has advised the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

What is asbestos?

Asbestos refers to six types of natural mineral fibers that are bound in rock.

How are people exposed to asbestos?

Everyone in the U.S. has been exposed to asbestos through the air. It weathers naturally and has been widely used in building construction materials. In the U.S. alone, there are at least 700,000 buildings of all types -- hospitals, high rise office buildings, homes, apartment buildings, prisons, courthouses and schools -- that have asbestos-containing materials. Generally there are extremely small but measurable levels of asbestos in the air and those levels have not been shown to cause disease. Harmful exposure only occurs when materials containing asbestos are disturbed or damaged in a way that releases fibers into the air and those fibers are inhaled or swallowed.

Where can I find asbestos?

Asbestos can be found in thousands of products, often in building materials (pipe wrap, attic insulation, roofing shingles, ceiling and floor tiles, paper products, and asbestos cement products), friction products (automobile clutch, brake, and transmission parts), and heat-resistant fabrics, packaging, gaskets and coatings. But it has also been found in many other products, including ironing board covers, older toaster ovens and hairdryers, cosmetics, crayons and contaminated talcum powder.

What are the health risks associated with asbestos?

Asbestos is a dangerous and potentially hazardous material that can cause a wide variety of diseases depending on the level of exposure. Those diseases include asbestosis (scarring of the lungs) and a variety of cancers including mesothelioma, which is related specifically to asbestos. Mesothelioma is extremely rare in the U.S., with about 3,000 cases per year in a population of 330 million people. Like most diseases, the risk of developing disease depends upon how much exposure you get. High exposure carries greater risk than lower levels. Most but not all people diagnosed with mesothelioma have had very high levels of exposure.

Are schools with any asbestos-containing materials unsafe?

The mere presence of asbestos in a building does not make it unsafe. Asbestos that is typically found in schools, especially if monitored and kept in good shape, will be at levels that are very low and pose minimal risk. Ideally over time the goal should be to remove asbestos from all buildings, including schools. Until then, schools may be safer than many other buildings. In 1986, the Environmental Protection Agency's Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act (AHERA) required that all schools be inspected twice a year to identify any issues and reports be made available in each school. Schools are the only structures with this level of regulation.

Does any level of asbestos exposure mean I will get sick?

The presence of asbestos in a building doesn't automatically mean someone will get sick. The likelihood of getting diseases due to low levels of asbestos exposure is very low. It's not impossible but it is very unlikely. Risks associated with smoking, poor diets and driving inappropriately are all significantly higher than any risk associated with low levels of asbestos exposure like what you would typically find in a school.

What about long-term building occupants such as teachers and staff?

The risk to teachers and staff is somewhat different, as individuals could be in buildings for decades. However, if asbestos is properly managed, the risks to everyone should be low.

Do buildings have to be evacuated while asbestos work is being conducted?

Not necessarily. There are very detailed asbestos management processes that can be used to minimize the risk to occupants and workers while smaller-scale asbestos work is being conducted. Plastic can be put up and negative air circulated to keep fibers from spreading beyond the immediate work area. A High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) vacuum with a filter is also used on asbestos work sites to capture as much as 99.99% of the fibers that may become loose. For public safety, air testing is required after asbestos work is completed to ensure levels are within acceptable ranges.

What can I do to minimize health risks due to asbestos?

The single biggest thing someone can do to minimize asbestos-based health risks is not smoke. People who have exposure to asbestos and who smoke are 50 times more likely to develop lung cancer, far more than from just either asbestos or smoking alone.

How does asbestos impact asthma or other lung diseases?

As a physician, I have studied lung diseases for many years. The presence of asbestos in a school has no impact at all on a person's asthma or other lung conditions.

What else can I do to keep my child safe at school?

First, know the facts about asbestos and know the environmental conditions in your child's school by reviewing the AHERA reports available in each school or on the District's website.

In older schools, the most likely areas where your child may come in contact with asbestos are near pipes that may be wrapped with asbestos-containing materials and in some floor and ceiling tiles. As long as those areas remain intact and are not damaged, they do not pose a health risk. If you have small children, talk to them about not poking or playing near pipes. With older students, encourage them to tell a teacher, building engineer or the principal whenever they see unusual dust particles in an area or an open pipe.

Is the use of asbestos currently banned in the United States?

No. Over 60 countries in the world have banned the use of asbestos. America is not one of them so it continues to be used in many products sold in the U.S.