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Yorktown man fights school PCBs, prompts state rules

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A Yorktown man's crusade against PCBs in his son's school and beyond has prompted new state rules requiring public schools to test for the toxins before renovating certain buildings. Broader, more costly mandates may also be on the way.*

The PCBs in question are in certain types of caulk most commonly found around windows in commercial buildings constructed in the 1960s and 1970s.

PCBs have long been considered a serious health risk. However, no one knows how much PCB-laden caulk is in the nation's buildings.

In Yorktown, parents supported a \$300,000 cleanup that went beyond Environmental Protection Agency requirements, saying they wanted to ensure their children's safety.

School officials in other districts, who learned about the issue from The Journal News, said they want to do what they can to protect students. However, should the testing reveal a need to remediate, they hope the state will pick up the cost instead of passing it on to local taxpayers.

"We could be looking at major dollars," said Superintendent Robert McNaughton of Ramapo Central schools. Most of the district's seven buildings, like many in Rockland County, were constructed or expanded in the 1960s and '70s.

During that era, polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, were used in numerous products, including electrical transformers, paints and commercial sealants such as the caulking in masonry and windows. Their use was banned by the federal government in 1977 because of concerns over their safety. Still, they linger in buildings, the environment and nearly everyone's body.

Caulk contamination has only recently surfaced as a possibly widespread problem. But while health authorities don't dispute the potential dangers of PCB exposure in high amounts, some of them question whether contamination from caulk poses a serious threat, since the most common means of exposure is eating contaminated fish. In addition, public health officials say they must balance the risk of exposure with the cost of widespread remediation. Several buildings in other states have had costly cleanups.

PCBs and children

Because their organs are still developing, fetuses and children are more susceptible to PCBs than adults. The most likely way infants are exposed is from breast milk containing PCBs, although the benefits of breast-feeding normally outweigh the risks. Older children can be exposed by putting dirty hands or other objects in their mouths or playing with old electrical devices that contain PCBs.

How to reduce families' risk of exposure

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- If your doctor finds that you have been exposed to significant amounts of PCBs, ask whether your children might also be exposed. Your doctor might need to ask the state Health Department to investigate.

- You and your children may be exposed by eating fish or wildlife caught from contaminated locations. Obey state advisories about fish and wildlife.

- Children should not play with old appliances, electrical equipment or transformers. Those who live near hazardous-waste sites should be discouraged from playing in the dirt near them and in areas where there was a transformer fire. Children should be discouraged from eating dirt and should wash hands carefully.

When making regulations, "there's an attempt to try to balance burden with need," said Daniel Kraft, EPA supervisory environmental scientist. "Testing is a big burden."

A woman with high PCB levels will pass those levels on to her child in the womb and through her breast milk. In infants, high levels have been linked to low birth weight and neurological effects, such as problems with short-term memory and motor skills; in adults, they're linked to severe acne and liver problems.

But the amounts needed to cause these problems are more likely to come from eating too much contaminated fish rather than from inhaling PCBs or touching PCB-laden caulk, some researchers say.

In Yorktown, the situation was discovered last year when Daniel Lefkowitz found caulking outside his son's school and had it tested along with surrounding soil. Because PCB levels were elevated, the EPA required the district to remediate. He thinks the issue is not limited to Yorktown.

"This is an issue and a problem that is affecting thousands of buildings in New York state and throughout the country," he said. "Now this is on the radar scope, and they can't ignore it."

No one knows how many of the state's 8,000 schools have used caulk with PCBs, or whether the PCBs escaped into the environment. While the EPA has regulations about what levels are acceptable, and special cleanup and disposal procedures when levels are exceeded, there is no requirement to test for PCBs.

In the case of PCBs in caulk, the matter is complicated by the fact that few studies have been done on their ability to contaminate the buildings they are in and the people who inhabit them.

Lefkowitz was motivated by a Harvard study when he set out to see whether his son's school had PCBs in the caulk that was removed. Since then, he has persuaded state officials and lawmakers to take action.

In a survey of the state's architecture and engineering firms, the state Education Department found that few have been testing for PCBs in caulk before renovating. Those that did said they also found asbestos and lead in the caulking and therefore used a careful abatement process, said Carl T. Thurnau, director of facilities. That was the case in Yorktown's other schools that had windows replaced. From now on, all New York schools will be required to test for PCBs in caulking before refurbishing buildings from the 1960s and '70s.

Assemblyman Willis Stephens, R-Southeast, plans to introduce a bill to require every district to test a sample of caulk in buildings constructed or substantially refurbished before January 1978. The state would cover the cost of the testing, which would be about \$60 per sample, his legislative director said. Stephens said this legislation would be a first step in assessing the magnitude of the problem.

- If you're exposed to PCBs at work, it's possible to carry them home. If this is your situation, shower and change before leaving work, keep your work clothes separate from other clothes, and launder them separately.

Source: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta:
www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/phs17.html