

The J.F.K. Health and Welfare Fund, Inc.

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Your Health

How to live Longer and Healthier by being in the know.

2000 years ago, Pliny the Elder, a Roman commander and noted historian, observed that slaves who toiled in quarries mining a wondrous, fireproof substance and those who were employed to weave this fiber known as *asbestinon* by the Greeks, died young of a disease of the lungs. We know this "wonder substance" as asbestos. So why is asbestos of interest to anyone right now? The automotive industry stopped using Asbestos in brake pads in the mid 90's. The trade center building had Asbestos in the fire proofing up to 40 something floors and then switched over to other materials. Even though in the late 1970s court documents proved the asbestos industry officials knew of asbestos dangers since the 1930s and had concealed this from the public. In 2007, a bill in the senate was passed, which the cosponsors thought would outlaw all asbestos. However, when final bill passed, it allowed items to contain no more than 1% asbestos by weight. Unimportant you might think? Think again. This means a 100 pound bag of play sand for your children's or grandchildren's sand box can have up to 1 pound of asbestos and still be legal. Is anyone willing to let any one you know play in such sand? Chances are you will never encounter such sand even if it is legal to sell it, at least you hope not.

So where else might you encounter asbestos. We all know it was used around boilers, and as insulation for steam pipes. By the way, the more expensive the home, the better and deadlier grade of asbestos they used. (This is also true of paint in your high end homes of the early part of the last century. The more expensive the house, the greater the **lead** content of the paints they used. So, if you are living in a historic old house in a land marked designated neighborhood, never strip paint from woodwork by sanding or heat gun or any manner that will create dust or vapors, unless you have the paint checked beforehand. Better to rip the woodwork out and just replace it. By the way, the best liquid paint strippers contain NMP, DBE or methylene chloride in combination with acetone, toluene, or methanol. All bad stuff as in nerve and organ damage, cancer, etc.) Sorry for the digression.

Back to Asbestos.

In the 50's, another type of insulation became popular and it goes by the trade name of **Zonolite**.

Zonolite is produced from a natural stone that is heated to 2900°F where it then puffs up 8 to 30 times in size. It now becomes soft and spongy granules which cannot burn or rot and is totally insect proof and is an excellent and cheap form of insulation. Just about everyone has seen this substance, but

maybe not by its insulation trade name. You probably recognize Zonolite as **vermiculite**, which is still used as an aerator in potting soil mixes and is sometimes mixed with sphagnum moss and other organic materials to make compacted garden soils lighter. All the vermiculite in the world before 1990 came from one place, Libby Montana. Vermiculite is still sold today in 18 quart bags, but as far as I know, only as a soil conditioner and I do not know if all this new Vermiculite is pure. But, from the early 50s and beyond you could buy large bags of Zonolite for as little as \$1.35 per bag. You just had to pour it in loose, four or more inches deep in between your ceiling joists, or on top of your existing insulation or in wall spaces. It was just that simple. Simple to install, but now, not so simple to remove. Yes, asbestos exist naturally in the environment, but at exceedingly low levels.

Fortunately, I have only encountered this type of insulation once or twice in all of the attics I have worked in. I had very little if any contact with it, which was a good thing, because virtually all of it is contaminated with, you guessed it, Asbestos.

So why after 2000 years is any product still sold that is contaminated with asbestos. Good question, but I have a better one, why is it your tax dollars and medical insurance premiums are being used for smoking cessation programs and to purchase smoking cessation drugs and yet, tobacco farmers still get subsidies to grow tobacco? Subject for another **Your Health**

What to do if your house has vermiculite insulation installed before 1990? First, do not disturb it in any way. Stay away from it and stay out of your attic area . If you are in the attic and have to disturbs the vermiculite, you will become contaminated. Remove any clothing and wash the same and shower. Wearing traditional dust mask, even those N-95 you may see at work are not sufficient. The fibers are exceeding small and this is why they are so dangerous. You can buy masks that will trap asbestos. Asbestos in vermiculite insulation does not go away. And yes, it can seep into living areas of your home by drafts coming through cracks in your walls and ceilings. One single tiny filament, thinner than a human, hair can be broken down into hundreds of micro fibers. These micro fibers are light as air and once breathed in, can bypass all our bodily defense mechanisms and can end up imbedded deep in our lung tissue. By the mid eighties, most of the Western world, Australia and Japan in 1995, have banned all asbestos. But not the US.

Yours in good Health, Ray Ciccolilli