RTC SAFETY BULLETIN

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ASBESTOS

This is a naturally occurring mineral fiber, found in rock form, whose Greek name means inextinguishable. It is noted for its fire/chemical resistant qualities and the flexibility that permits it to be woven into cloth. Its long, narrow fibers are so minuscule that they can only be seen through a microscope. Not only does asbestos have high tensile strength, its fibers bind well with other materials, making them even stronger.

Asbestos is classified as a carcinogen, a cancer-causing material.

Three serious diseases are linked to this carcinogen: Mesothelioma, a rare cancer of the lining of the chest and abdominal cavity; Asbestosis, a scarring of the lung tissue that leads to shortness of breath whereby a person cannot get enough oxygen to walk, let alone live; Lung Cancer, where people exposed to asbestos fibers are five times more likely to develop this disease than the general population (This incidence increases by 50 times if the person also smokes cigarettes).

Exposure to asbestos fibers occurs through inhalation. The fibers are often so small that in comparison, a human hair is 1,200 times larger than the asbestos fiber. Many of the fibers are trapped by mucous in the breathing passageways or in nasal hair and expelled.

The smallest ones escape the human body's defense systems and penetrate deep into the lungs.

Asbestos does not pass through the skin.

Exposure to asbestos fibers does not cause immediate symptoms such as itching and sneezing, and most people exposed to asbestos in daily life do not develop these health problems. The body cannot break down the trapped fibers in the lungs, and each additional exposure adds a burden to the body. As long as the fibers remain in the lungs, and there doesn't appear to be a way to remove them, a person is at risk for developing a lung disease. The diseases previously mentioned might not appear for 10 to 40 years. There are no "safe" limits of exposure to asbestos. One cannot turn back the clock.

Because asbestos is plentiful, readily available and low in cost, it was used extensively in the building trades between 1920 and 1978.

Not only was asbestos used by itself, but it was combined with thousands of products such as exterior roofing shingles, siding, concrete, floor and ceiling tiles, plasters, insulation for pipes and walls, putties, caulks, and more. These products are called Asbestos-Containing Material (ACM).

Is asbestos easily recognizable? NO. Products may be suspect because of what they are and where they are used, but the only way to know for sure is by sampling/testing. Only accredited personnel may obtain samples. The samples are sent to a BUMED lab, which use a polarizing light microscope to identify the presence of asbestos in the sample.

An Asbestos Program Manager (APM) has been appointed by the Commanding Officer, Naval Station, to implement an Asbestos Management Program. The APM prior to start of work shall review contract/awards/self-help projects.

The Navy policy is to eliminate asbestos hazards by substitution with asbestos free material or where this is not possible, through the use of engineering, administrative controls and respiratory protection. Don't remove installed asbestos containing materials, which are in good condition, for the sole purposed of eliminating asbestos.

In the work place, simple rules will minimize/eliminate exposure to asbestos fibers. They are as follows:

- Do not abrade, drill or sand ACM
- Ensure materials to be removed from facilities, specifically ceiling and floor tiles, have been confirmed by the APM