

Asbestos: The Forgotten Killer

- A CBS 2 Special Assignment with Linda Alvarez

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Many people believe asbestos was banned years ago. But it wasn't. As Special Assignment's Linda Alvarez tells us, asbestos is still being used in everyday products, and people are still dying from exposure.

Asbestos is a known cancer-causing fiber. There is no safe level of exposure. In 1989, the EPA tried to ban it but the asbestos industry sued and blocked the ban. Now one U.S. senator is renewing her call for action.

Alan Reinstein: "I had a little problem swallowing and I would cough a bit." It started with a cough, and then a liter of fluid filled his lungs. For nine months, no one knew what was wrong with him, until doctors opened him up.

Reinstein: "He said, 'You've got mesothelioma in there, you've got plenty of cancer.'"

An often deadly cancer. A cancer you may not even know you have for 15 to 40 years after you've been exposed to asbestos -- a fiber used in thousands of products decades ago from building insulation to linoleum tiles, even hair dryers. Alan says there are many ways he could have been exposed during his lifetime.

In the in the 1970s, when many people worried about asbestos' link to cancer, its use was significantly cut back. But today, if you think you can't be exposed to asbestos, you are wrong.

U.S. Senator Patty Murray: "I think most Americans think asbestos was banned from this country many, many years ago. The fact is, we are importing tons of asbestos in this country today that's being put into brake pads, lining material, insulation.

The asbestos industry says the way the fiber is used today is perfectly safe, but Sen. Murray says we are long overdue for a ban.

"We need to join the vast majority of countries in the world and ban the use of asbestos in this country and we need to do it now," Sen. Murray says.

The Senator also believes there's an urgent need to stop people from unknowingly exposing themselves to asbestos.

"We need to have an educational campaign. It is appalling to me that a homeowner can accidentally get exposed to asbestos in their own home."

A study by the environmental working group finds 10,000 Americans die each year from asbestos exposure.

Los Angeles County has the highest rate of cases in the nation. Experts attribute that to decades of widespread use of asbestos in the shipping and construction industry.

Linda Reinstein: "I have to keep my own personal anger in check and turn anger into action."

She now heads an asbestos awareness group and like Sen. Murray wants a ban and an educational campaign on asbestos.

As for Alan, doctors removed one of his lungs, his diaphragm and some lymph nodes to cut out the cancer.

Right now, he is cancer free.

Legislation is currently moving through congress that would set up a fund for victims of asbestos exposure and it includes a ban on asbestos. To get information on Linda Reinstein's organization, Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, log onto www.AsbestosDiseaseAwareness.org.

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