

News Story

Government warns insulation may contain asbestos

Product may have been used in untold number of homes

Health Canada is warning that attic insulation in some homes may contain a form of asbestos that is a known cancer-causing agent. The insulation in question is a form of vermiculite produced from the Libby Mine in Montana from the 1920s to 1990, and sold in Canada as Zonolite® Attic Insulation. It may have been sold under other labels as well. The mine accounted for most of the world's supply of vermiculite until it was closed in 1990.

The product was used in Canada from the 1920's until the mid 1980's. No breakdown of geographic use or installation is available.

Health Canada's advisory says vermiculite produced from that mine might contain tremolite asbestos. When inhaled, asbestos fibers can lodge in the lungs, which, over time may result in lung diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer, or mesothelioma. The advisory says there is no evidence of risk to your health if the insulation is sealed behind wallboard, or isolated in an attic away from the inside of a home.

Not all vermiculite produced before 1990 contains asbestos fibers. However, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that if a building has older vermiculite-based insulation, it may contain some asbestos.

Health Canada estimates that four per cent of the existing Canadian housing stock made use of the insulation. By comparison, it is estimated that one per cent of the housing stock, or 60,000-80,000 homes, had UFFI insulation.

Health Canada advises that if properly installed and sealed, and if left undisturbed, the vermiculite insulation poses very little health risk. If the insulation is disturbed, releasing asbestos fibers into the air, the risks are more serious, and get worse with increased exposure.

Residents and those visiting buildings with the insulation are advised to make sure children don't play in the attic, and should not use the attic as storage space if it will disturb the insulation. Residents should not disturb the insulation or attempt to remove it themselves.

The advisory does not apply to vermiculite used in potting soil or other horticultural products.

More information on the vermiculite insulation, including **full-colour pictures** which may be useful in identifying the product, can be found on Health Canada's website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/products/insulation.html>, and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp.'s asbestos page at http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/burema/gesein/abhose/abhose_ce03.cfm. (CREA 01/04/2004)



A close up of Vermiculite in an attic.