Vermiculite Insulation

Vermiculite Insulation containing Asbestos has been in the news, recently. What does Health Canada say about the issue?

“Some vermiculite insulation may contain asbestos fibers. These products can cause health risks if disturbed during maintenance, renovation or demolition. However, there is currently no evidence of risk to your health if insulation is sealed behind wallboards and floorboards, isolated in an attic or otherwise kept from exposure to the interior environment”.

Vermiculite is a mica-like mineral mined around the world and used in a variety of commercial and consumer products because of its fire-resistance and insulating qualities. Of concern is vermiculite ore produced by the Libby Mine in Montana from the 1920's to 1990. It was sold as Zonolite® Attic Insulation and possibly other brands in Canada during that time. Vermiculite from the Libby Mine may contain asbestos. The Libby Mine supplied the majority of the world market in vermiculite-based insulation. Products made from vermiculite ore produced by the Libby Mine were not widely used after the mid-1980's and have not been on the market in Canada for more than 10 years. Not all vermiculite produced before 1990 contains asbestos fibres. However, to be safe and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that vermiculite-based insulation may contain some asbestos.

If you encounter vermiculite insulation at the University, please contact EHSO at 474-6633, for advice on how to handle the material.

If you have it in your home, it is best to minimize your risk of asbestos exposure by avoiding disturbing vermiculite-based insulation in any way. If it is in your home but contained and not exposed to the home or interior environment it poses very little risk. If you have vermiculite-based insulation in your attic, take these precautionary steps:

- Do not allow children to play in attic with open vermiculite based insulation and be sure anyone working in the attic knows about possible presence of asbestos and precautions to be taken. Common Dust masks are not effective and should not be used.
- Do not use attic for storage if retrieving items may disturb the insulation.
- If you must go into attic, walk on boards to minimize disturbance of insulation and use appropriate respirator mask. Do not remain longer than necessary.
- If you decide to remove vermiculite-based insulation, NEVER attempt to remove it yourself. Get professional help.
- If you plan to remodel/renovate in a manner that would disturb vermiculite, consult a trained professional who is qualified to handle asbestos.
- Seal all cracks and holes in ceilings of rooms below insulation to prevent it sifting through. (For example, apply caulking around light fixtures and attic hatch.
- If you suspect you have vermiculite-based insulation in walls, seal all cracks and holes. For example apply caulking around windows, door frames, along baseboards and electrical outlets.

For more information on this issue, call Health Canada at 1-800-443-0395 or visit the following web site.