

National Consumer Awareness Campaign Launched on Vermiculite Insulation Used in some Home Attics

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(05/21/03) The federal government today launched a national consumer awareness campaign to provide homeowners with important information on vermiculite attic insulation which may contain asbestos. This new campaign, coordinated by EPA and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), instructs homeowners on how to identify vermiculite attic insulation and recommends that people make every effort to not disturb it. Since some vermiculite attic insulation can contain very low levels of microscopic asbestos fibers, it is important that consumers are aware of the precautions they can take to protect against disturbing and inhaling the asbestos fibers.

"The government believes that people should be aware that some vermiculite attic insulation can contain microscopic asbestos fibers, and there are practical steps that homeowners can take to minimize exposure. People who have homes with vermiculite attic insulation should become informed, not alarmed," said Stephen L. Johnson, EPA's Assistant Administrator for the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances. "By using the information in this campaign, people can determine if their home contains vermiculite attic insulation and learn how to properly manage it. Well informed consumers can reduce the possibility for exposure to asbestos from vermiculite attic insulation and minimize potential risks."

The key recommendations for homeowners to minimize exposure are:

- Homeowners should not disturb vermiculite attic insulation. Any disturbance has the potential to release asbestos fibers into the air.
- If homeowners must go into attic space with vermiculite insulation, they should make every effort to limit the number, duration, and activity level of those trips. Boxes or other items should not be stored in attics if retrieving them will disturb the insulation.
- Children should not be allowed to play in an attic with open areas of vermiculite insulation.
- Homeowners should never attempt to remove the vermiculite insulation. If removal is necessary, hire professionals trained and certified to safely remove the material.
- If you plan to remodel or conduct renovations that would disturb the vermiculite, hire professionals trained and certified to handle asbestos to safely remove the material.

Due to the scientific uncertainties associated with existing testing techniques, there is no easy way or dependable testing method to differentiate between vermiculite insulation that might have some asbestos fibers and vermiculite insulation that does not. Home testing vermiculite in attics is not currently practical. Therefore, it is best to assume that the material may contain asbestos and take the appropriate precautions. That is why EPA and ATSDR are today going forward with this consumer awareness campaign for homeowners that will allow them to identify the presence of vermiculite insulation in their attics, and if they have it, how best to reduce their potential exposure to the asbestos it may contain.

The campaign includes the nationwide distribution of a joint EPA and ATSDR pamphlet that outlines how to identify and manage vermiculite. The pamphlet will be disseminated to the national news media and through major hardware store chains, and through prominent display on EPA's website: <http://www.epa.gov/asbestos/>. Information is also available to consumers at a special hotline: **1-800-471-7127**.

In addition to the launch of today's campaign, the Agency is releasing three new documents on asbestos: a preliminary scientific study on six homes with vermiculite attic insulation, a study by Global Environment and Technology Foundation, and EPA's new Framework for the Asbestos Action Plan.

The first document provides a summary of results from a small scale study of six homes with asbestos-contaminated vermiculite insulation where a number of common insulation-disturbance scenarios were examined. The results of this study highlight both the uncertainty relating to current testing methodologies and the potential that when vermiculite attic insulation is disturbed, fibers of asbestos in contaminated insulation can become airborne. However, if the vermiculite is left undisturbed and managed in place, risk of exposure is greatly reduced.

The second document is the release of a new report, "Asbestos Strategies," by the Global Environment and Technology Foundation, a non-profit organization located in Arlington, Va. This report, funded by an EPA grant, reflects the efforts of key experts and stakeholders convened to address a range of asbestos issues, and provides recommendations and options for asbestos policy oversight, outreach, and education. This report can be obtained at: www.getf.org.

The third document is the "Framework for the Asbestos Action Plan," which outlines future research and risk reduction efforts that the Agency will undertake, including improving the state of science, and identifying and implementing ways to reduce risks from exposure to asbestos. These three documents will guide the Agency's future scientific and risk management strategies on asbestos.

Vermiculite is a granular product – absorbent and resistant to heat – that has been in commerce for almost 80 years. Much of the vermiculite used to make attic insulation originated from a mine in Libby, Montana, where there were natural veins of asbestos in the earth. That mine closed in 1990. Currently, vermiculite is mined at three U.S. facilities and in other countries which have lower levels of asbestos contamination in the finished material.

For additional information, visit: <http://www.epa.gov/asbestos/> or call **1-800-471-7127**.