

EQ-1989-SC County

New worry for homeowners

Quake may have loosened asbestos

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RP

11-9-89

Many people whose homes were damaged but not destroyed by the Oct. 17 earthquake have managed to shake off their fears and adjust to the sight of cracked walls and missing chunks of plaster in their ceilings.

It's exactly those people Heather Maurer is most worried about.

Maurer, executive director of Asbestos Victims of America, an advocacy and education group, warns that asbestos fibers may have been shaken loose from

walls, ceilings and insulation during the earthquake. When the microscopic fibers are released into the atmosphere and inhaled, they lodge in the lungs and can cause a number of respiratory problems and cancers years after the exposure.

Those fibers could also continue to be released during aftershocks, cleanup, demolition and repairs of damaged buildings, she said, posing a hazard to workers and people living nearby.

Asbestos, which has fire-retardant properties, was widely used for insulation and in ceiling

and wall materials in buildings constructed between 1920 and 1979. In a solid form, asbestos is harmless. But when the materials containing asbestos break up, the fibers can become airborne and dangerous.

Ed Kendig, enforcement counsel at the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District, seemed less concerned than Maurer about the health hazards to people living with cracked walls and ceilings. A crack, broken acoustical tile, or even a missing chunk of plaster isn't something to worry about, unless it appears that other pieces of the wall or ceiling will continue

to break up or fall down, he said.

"It's a matter of degree," he said, "It's when it's disturbed that fibers can be released. If there are big cracks or if there are sheers in homes built before 1979 it's probably a good idea to take samples and get them tested."

Cabrillo College officials were concerned about the release of asbestos after the earthquake. When they saw that their asbestos-laden "cottage cheese" ceilings had left a layer of white dust on classroom floors and

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walls, the school was closed for two weeks for a \$90,000 cleanup operation. Numerous air samples, taken both inside and outside the campus buildings were analyzed before the school reopened, said John Barker, head of Cabrillo's Health, Safety and Protective Services.

But Maurer's main concern is not so much with the large buildings or with demolitions being overseen by county or city agencies, but with homeowners who might do cleanup or repairs themselves or who might hire a contractor who is unaware of the hazards.

The Air Pollution Control District regulates the demolition of industrial and commercial buildings, requiring written notification before demolition begins. When possible, federal law requires that asbestos be removed before demolition. When that's not possible, in cases where it's too dangerous to enter a building for inspection and removal, demolition has to be done according to certain regulations.

The building materials have to be taken away in special trucks and disposed of in hazardous-waste dumps. Such regulations, however, don't apply to resi-

dences, Kendig said, adding that he thought that was unfortunate. He said regulations for residences are in the making.

Unlike Maurer, Mike Baldwin, an inspector at Watsonville's building inspection department, said he didn't think there would be much of a problem with asbestos release in residences in Watsonville. He said he didn't think there would be much asbestos-laden materials in the homes that need demolition because most of them were built before asbestos was widely used. If people know they have asbestos in their homes they need to get licensed contractors to remove it, he said, adding that the department has informational handouts on asbestos available.

Maurer also urges people who suspect there may be asbestos in their homes to get samples of broken building materials tested. Labs can be found in the Yellow Pages under "laboratory testing," she said.

If asbestos is found, repairs and cleanup should be done professionally. FEMA money is available to pay for the extra expenses involved with dealing with asbestos. In the meantime, plastic tarps can be put up on ceilings or walls to prevent more fibers from escaping, she said. Heating ducts wrapped with asbestos should be checked carefully for breakage,

she said.

Adding that it's probably too late for this advice, Maurer said people should not vacuum up broken ceiling and wall pieces. Instead, the dust and broken pieces should be wetted down with something like a plant mister and cleaned up with paper towels. The pieces should then be put into a strong plastic garbage bag and labeled. The bag should be disposed of at a special site, not dumped with regular trash, she said. During the cleanup, plastic gloves should be worn.

Maurer and Barker said people should not use their vacuums again if they cleaned up asbestos-laden materials with them, because the fibers will be blown out of the bag into the air each time the cleaner is used. In some cases, an asbestos abatement agency will be able to remove the particles from a vacuum cleaner.

Maurer said her agency can provide information on asbestos-related repairs, inspection and health. The AVA also keeps a list of licensed asbestos abatement contractors. For more information, call 476-3646.

The Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District can be reached at 443-1135. Information is also available at county environmental health departments, Kendig said.