

Remodeling boom leads to illegal dumping of asbestos

By CHRIS COUNTS

A BOOM in the remodeling of old homes on the Monterey Peninsula has been great for building contractors, but has officials at the landfill worried.

That's because asbestos — a group of minerals with long, thin fibers that researchers have linked to lung cancer — was commonly used in the construction of homes before 1980. And as contractors dismantle old homes, asbestos-laden building products are ending up in the landfill with alarming frequency.

"There is a lot of remodeling going on in places like Carmel and Pacific Grove," explained William Merry, general manager of the Monterey Regional Waste Management District. "Homeowners and contractors have a responsibility to determine if asbestos is on their job. It's against the law to put it in a dumpster or take it to the landfill."

According to Merry, asbestos fibers can be found in roofing material, ceiling tiles, sheet rock, floor tiles, siding and other building materials.

While the responsibility for properly disposing of asbestos falls on homeowners and contractors, a local government agency, the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District, is available to help people identify asbestos-laden building products.

In an effort to reduce the amount of asbestos that ends up in landfills, the district has launched a "Don't Mess With Asbestos" campaign.

"When in doubt, check it out," urged air pollution inspector Mike Sheehan, who runs the agency's asbestos program.

Asbestos is more dangerous than it looks, he explained. When asbestos fibers are dis-

A simple test will determine if asbestos is present

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turbed, they become airborne and can be inhaled. After becoming lodged in the lungs, it could take 10 years before the asbestos fibers cause health problems.

"It's primarily a respiratory hazard," Sheehan said.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's website (www.epa.com/asbestos), asbestos can cause several different forms of lung cancer and lung disease.

Because of the health risks associated with asbestos, homeowners and contractors are subject to fines of up to \$25,000 if they don't handle them properly, Sheehan added.

But Sheehan brushed off concerns that asbestos-laden homes pose a risk to their occupants.

"Most asbestos products don't represent a threat unless they are disturbed," he explained.

After contacting the air pollution control district, homeowners and contractors will be referred to a laboratory that tests building materials for asbestos.

"It's really quite simple and inexpensive to test for it," Sheehan said. "You can Fedex it to the lab, and they'll charge you about \$30 for each material they test. And they only need a small sample."

For more information about the asbestos program, call (831) 647-9411.

If it's there

So how does a homeowner or contractor get rid of asbestos-laden material?

"Most of these materials need to be handled by asbestos abatement contractors," Sheehan explained. "They'll see to the proper disposal of the material."

Sheehan suggested homeowners and contractors contact one of two local asbestos abatement contractors, Disaster Cleanup of Seaside and Coastwide Environmental Techs of Watsonville.

According to Guy Clendenin, a project manager for Disaster Cleanup, the cost of disposal for asbestos-laden material typically ranges from \$500 to \$3,000, depending on the size of the house and the project.