

OSHA workers tainted by beryllium exposure

Agency criticized for downplaying metal's hazards

By Sam Roe
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The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, long criticized for downplaying the dangers of beryllium, has discovered that several of its employees have been affected by exposure to the deadly metal.

The Tribune has learned that ongoing medical testing shows that at least three OSHA workers have developed blood abnormalities linked to beryllium exposure—the first such cases at the agency. The workers are thought to have been exposed while conducting safety inspections in industries using beryllium, a lightweight metal whose dust can cause an often-fatal lung disease.

Beryllium is used in a variety of industries to help make products ranging from missile components to laptop computers to golf clubs. The safety agency estimates that 1,000 inspectors, or three-fourths of its force, have conducted inspections in industries handling the metal.

People who have blood abnormalities don't necessarily have beryllium disease; the abnormalities mean the body's immune system has reacted to beryllium exposure. Further tests, such as a lung biopsy, are needed to confirm illness. Experts estimate about half the people with blood abnormalities will develop the disease.

OSHA officials said until testing is complete, they would not comment on results nor confirm whether any employees have blood abnormalities. But sources said at least three do.

Details of the cases, including the workers and workplaces involved, were unavailable. But OSHA records obtained by the Tribune show that agency employees have conducted inspections in numerous sites nationwide with high levels of beryllium dust.

The agency has been attacked for years for being slow to address the dangers of beryllium, one of the most potentially toxic materials handled in the workplace. Some researchers think OSHA's worker-exposure limit

Beryllium disease

Beryllium is an extremely light-weight metal that is six times as stiff as steel. It is not hazardous in solid form, but its dust can cause an often-fatal lung illness if inhaled.

Beryllium disease is an inflammatory reaction of the respiratory system that includes scarring of the lungs.

SYMPTOMS

<i>Symptoms can appear as late as 40 years after exposure and can include:</i>	Cough
	Fatigue
	Shortness of breath
	Night chills
	Weight loss

TREATMENT

The inflammation can be treated with steroids, but there is no cure for the disease.

Source: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

is inadequate, while others have faulted the agency for delays in offering blood tests to its inspectors.

The private beryllium industry and some U.S. military facilities have been testing their workers since the 1990s, often discovering cases of beryllium disease where there was thought to be none.

But OSHA did not test its workers until after a top agency official, Adam Finkel, filed a whistle-blower complaint on the matter in 2003, alleging that he was transferred because he was advocating a safety plan OSHA higher-ups didn't want. The agency denied the claim and the case was settled.

Whistle-blower saddened

Finkel, who now teaches health policy at Princeton University, said he was saddened to learn some workers have developed blood abnormalities, but "it's exactly what I said would happen."

He said OSHA officials knew inspectors were exposed to high levels of beryllium dust and that agency officials should have offered testing sooner. "They let them twist in the wind for many

years," he said. Finkel, who remains on OSHA's payroll until next year as part of the whistle-blower settlement, emphasized that he was speaking for himself and not the agency.

"Dr. Finkel certainly wasn't crying wolf," said Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, an advocacy group that backed Finkel. Because those exposed to beryllium dust have a lifelong risk of developing disease, Ruch urged OSHA to expand testing to include former inspectors. "The public health rationale for only doing current workers is completely mystifying," he said.

To date, OSHA has tested 265 current employees. The agency would not comment on whether it would expand testing to include former inspectors. "When we have all the results in, we'll be taking a look at it and will be making revisions as necessary," said Ruth McCully, the agency's director of science, technology and medicine.

Officials shrugged off testing

OSHA officials have said testing was not done years ago because it was not a priority. In an interview with the Tribune last year, Davis Layne, an OSHA deputy assistant secretary who oversaw the testing, said he would not be tested himself even though he had spent time inside a facility that handled beryllium.

"I just don't think it's anything that I'm concerned about," he said at the time.

Layne, who retired from OSHA in December, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Beryllium experts urge that everyone exposed be tested. There is no cure for beryllium disease, but early detection can aid treatment. Symptoms include shortness of breath and fatigue, and some people eventually cannot breathe without the aid of an oxygen tank.

About 1,300 people have contracted the disease since the 1940s. At the University of Chicago, several workers became sick after being exposed to beryllium at a World War II research lab. At Argonne National Laboratory, southwest of Chicago, at least seven current or former workers have been found to have blood abnormalities.