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Asbestos study brings adjustments

El Dorado residents try to gauge risk, precautions.

By Carrie Peyton Dahlberg -- Bee Staff Writer
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Anxious or cavalier, angry or curious, El Dorado County residents and officials Monday were sizing up how a new federal asbestos study could affect their lives and their health.

For the first time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has tried to assess the ways that outdoor activities - how kids and adults run and play - might boost their exposure to naturally occurring asbestos.

It concluded that baseball, basketball and bicycling all are among activities that can kick up increased asbestos-laden dust at some sites, raising the amount of tiny, toxic fibers that a person inhales.

What is still unknown, and the question that lingered in the minds of many on Monday, is what does that mean in regard to how people go about their daily lives?

"What is the risk of being on the softball field vs. riding in the car vs. getting hit by lightning? Folks need to have that information," said Laura Gill, El Dorado County's chief administrative officer.

Denise Hountalis, who was watching her 2-year-old play with his toy trucks in a sandbox at El Dorado Hills Community Park, said the EPA report has left her wondering how widespread the problem truly is, and how careful she needs to be.

"Can't we just go out for a walk?" she asked as she sat in the warm afternoon sun. "My feeling is you can't keep kids holed up in the house all day."

For their part, county officials walked a cautious line, saying they were concerned about public health and eager to learn all they could, but also eager to have the spotlight broadened into a nationwide look at naturally occurring asbestos.

Without such comparisons, asked Jon Morgan, the county's environmental management director, "how do we know we have a problem?"

"How do we know the emissions (measured by the EPA) didn't come from Placer or Amador County? How do we know that downtown Sacramento doesn't have much worse than our conditions?"

It's OK for El Dorado County to be "picked on" if that leads to greater understanding of the issue nationwide, Morgan said. "I want everyone to pay attention. Asbestos is an emotional issue, so let's make sure we do it right."

It's unclear what, if anything, the county needs to do in response to this new report, given that El Dorado is already active on the issue and that more work needs to be done nationally, he said.

El Dorado County has been working since last summer on expanded dust-control regulations, which could be issued in the next two to three months.

It hopes to pull together tips on protective steps the public could take, such as closing windows on windy days, taking off shoes outdoors, or dusting with a damp cloth, so that people can act based

on their own comfort levels, Gill said.

"We make those kinds of decisions every day," she said, about everything from the foods we eat to what sports we enjoy.

Gill, who lives in El Dorado Hills, lets her children play in the tot lot that was one focus of EPA measurements, but she adds, "I'm also letting my daughter learn how to ride horses, and that has its own set of problems. Look at Christopher Reeve."

Fibers from naturally occurring asbestos, found in rocks that run through portions of El Dorado County, can lodge in the lungs and decades later cause mesothelioma, a cancer of the chest and other membranes.

The long exposure period and mobility of foothill residents has some people fearing that the true effect is being soft-pedaled by those whose financial health is tied to the county's growth.

Bernard Schur, a Sacramento retiree, said he worries about his 8- and 11-year-old grandchildren, who are growing up in El Dorado Hills.

"I believe there are people who either consciously or subconsciously are more worried about the economic impact of having asbestos in their community than they are in the long-term effects on families and children," he said.

County Supervisor Helen Baumann said the Sierra foothills in general, and El Dorado County in particular, offer "a very healthy, very safe environment."

She is one of only two county supervisors authorized by her colleagues to speak publicly on what has been a difficult issue for the county. Baumann said she's been giving interviews and tracking calls from national television networks and other media.

The trouble with the study released Monday, she said, is that "we don't know how to put that data into context. That science is going to take some time."

She urged people to attend upcoming meetings on the subject.

As the research evolves, those who live and work in El Dorado County are making their own best guesses on how to juggle today's choices with a disease that might lurk decades away.

Al Alegria, 66, a regular jogger at Community Park, now avoids running on dirt areas, such as paths or baseball infields. "I figure if I run on grass it's better for you," he said.

John Willis, a building contractor who remodels homes throughout the El Dorado County foothills, said he plans to ask his insurance company what liabilities he might face when moving dirt around.

Meanwhile, Jackson School, in the Rescue School District, has shut down the educational garden where its students once learned how seeds could turn into the foods they eat.

The closure came after officials learned the EPA had some concerns but before seeing any firm data, said Vicki Barber, county superintendent of schools, who described the measure as an interim precaution.

While asbestos is still being studied, she said, "a prudent course of action would be to not have students digging around in the dirt."

Public forums

- The EPA will hold a public meeting on its findings at 7 p.m. Friday at the Community Park gymnasium, 1021 Harvard Way.
- At the same meeting, the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry will present a report on the health risks from asbestos exposure at Oak Ridge High School.

- Both agencies will have representatives available for questions from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the gym.

About the writer:

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