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School faces asbestos warning

U.S. report to urge health checks for some students, staff in El Dorado Hills.

By Chris Bowman -- Bee Staff Writer

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Federal health officials say those who have played or coached sports, or tended fields at El Dorado Hills' high school prior to this academic year, should be checked for early signs of asbestos-related disease, according to a draft of a public advisory obtained by The Bee.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry - a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta - recommends the early medical screening because significant amounts of the naturally occurring minerals have been found on baseball diamonds, the running track and dirt paths at Oak Ridge High School, attended by 1,800 students.

"Because some increased risk of developing asbestos-related disease is possible, people in the most highly exposed groups (coaches, outdoor maintenance staff and student athletes) should inform their physician about their potential asbestos exposure so that their physician can ... watch for early signs of the disease," says the draft of the ATSDR's findings, which are scheduled for public release May 6.

The school's head track coach said Monday the advisory struck him as common-sense advice, though he does not believe the asbestos fibers kicked up by runners or even builders' bulldozers will cause harm.

"I have zero concern (for) myself or my family, including my daughter, who is on one of the track teams," Mark Bosse said.

The report does not address another group that faced potentially high asbestos exposure: The Class of 1984, the school's first graduates who studied in portable buildings as dust from ongoing construction of the campus swirled around them.

One of those graduates, Stephanie Werner, now the mother of an Oak Ridge student, said she and her former classmates are not worried.

"Everybody in my class appears healthy," said Werner, who saw nearly all members of the class at a reunion last summer.

The El Dorado Union High School District superintendent's office did not return a phone call from The Bee on Monday.

Asbestos-containment work completed last summer by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the El Dorado Union High School District has significantly reduced the threat, according to the draft distributed last month to senior state and federal environmental health officials.

The doctor check is one of several precautions the health agency recommends in a risk evaluation of asbestos exposures at the school, a study that was triggered by a citizen's petition to the agency.

Agency officials will not comment on the evaluation, formally called a public health consultation, until its public release at a May 6 community meeting, spokesman John Florence said Monday.

The health advisory addresses a large sweep of people who have attended or worked at Oak Ridge

High, a school in an affluent, fast-growing foothill community east of Sacramento.

Unlike earlier state and local investigations of the region's asbestos hazard, this one makes it clear that the "amphibole" form prevalent around the high school and the neighboring Community Center is hundreds of times more potent than the "chrysotile" form in causing mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the chest that occurs decades after exposure.

The federal health investigators concluded that "exposures to amphibole asbestos probably occurred in the past" at the high school, the report summary states.

"The greatest exposures were likely experienced by coaches who spent lots of time on athletic fields and tracks, outdoor maintenance staff and student athletes," the agency found.

The ATSDR finding does not mean that those exposed will develop disease. Rather, the report says, the "potential exposures were high enough to increase risk, and that mitigation activities (at the school) to prevent further exposure were justified and necessary."

At lesser risk are teachers who didn't do any coaching, indoor cleaning staff and students who weren't athletes, the ATSDR report said. At least risk are parents of athletes and "loyal sports spectators," the report said.

The report does not address other potential exposed groups, such as visiting teams and community youth football leagues that use the school's fields.

The findings are based on results of asbestos testing on campus by the EPA and consultants for the school district and recent studies in the foothills and elsewhere confirming that dust-raising activities - sliding into home plate and even walking on a dirt path - can greatly raise a person's exposure.

The report notes that it takes at least 10 years from initial exposure before signs of asbestos disease would appear.

Aubrey Miller, an EPA public health physician, said the diseases he would expect to see, if any, among people exposed at Oak Ridge High would be mesothelioma and pleural disease, a scarring and stiffening of tissue lining that lines the outside of the lungs. Dr. Miller studied diseased residents exposed to a similar type of amphibole asbestos in the northwestern Montana town of Libby.

Early signs of the disease include persistent coughing, chest pains and shortness of breath, Dr. Miller said. The disease can stabilize or progressively worsen to the point that victims can barely walk or breathe.

The ATSDR report also recommends that its health investigators and those at the EPA "investigate the potential for amphibole asbestos exposures in the community as a whole," according to the draft report.

To date, investigations by the two federal agencies have focused on school lots and community playgrounds in El Dorado Hills. Similar testing by state officials has been limited mostly to roads and driveways covered with serpentine gravel containing asbestos in the rural Garden Valley community near Placerville.

Missing from these studies are the potential asbestos hazards from dust kicked up by housing and road construction in the foothills, one of the fastest-growing areas in California.

State and county officials have adopted special dust-control requirements on builders in areas where geologists suspect the fibrous minerals occur.

The ATSDR says El Dorado County air pollution control officials "should ensure full enforcement of state and county air toxics regulations to minimize potential asbestos exposures in the community."

The El Dorado school district spent more than \$1.5 million in asbestos protections at the high school, and the EPA said it spent considerably more on paving and landscaping bare grounds, and replacing tainted soil in the baseball diamonds.

"ATSDR determined that asbestos exposures at the school have been minimized and are unlikely to increase the risk of disease," the report summary states.

The Oak Ridge campus is in a well-documented asbestos zone.

Early in 2002, the school district broke ground on a pair of soccer fields by carving out a hill rich with a type of amphibole asbestos called tremolite.

The earthmoving occurred while school was in session. School officials took great care to minimize the release of tremolite fibers as equipment churned up the soil, a county official said at the time.

But the job wasn't finished. Landscaping, irrigation, drainage and erosion-control work was put on hold because project managers had not secured reclaimed water they planned for irrigating the fields, school officials said.

As a result, wind and rain eroded the steep, unprotected slopes that have open veins of tremolite. The contaminated mounds were left open to students and the public with no warning signs.

School officials said air samples collected during construction picked up no asbestos. Tests commissioned by The Bee, however, found asbestos fibers in dust on the student parking lot, on fields under construction and in exposed veins of rock.

About the draft health report

Most at risk: Coaches, student athletes, outdoor maintenance workers at Oak Ridge High School in El Dorado Hills.

The study: Done by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry - a branch of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. It is set for release May 6 at a public meeting for El Dorado County residents.

Next: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will release its findings of tests on other areas of El Dorado Hills.

Medical help: If you are among the highest risk groups, the agency recommends that you tell your doctor about your potential asbestos exposure.

Other help: The agency plans to develop educational material for the community and health-care providers.

Getting your say: Once the report is released, there will be a public comment period, including community meetings.

Source: Bee research

Asbestos and health

What illnesses can asbestos cause?

Significant exposure to any type of asbestos increases the risk of lung cancer, mesothelioma, asbestosis and pleural disease.

How long do these illnesses take to develop?

Most cases of lung cancer and asbestosis occur 15 or more years after initial exposure. Children are at greatest risk because of their long life expectancy.

How much exposure is dangerous?

For naturally occurring asbestos, not enough studies have been done to answer this. What is known is that people are more likely to experience asbestos-related disorders when they are exposed to high concentrations of asbestos, are exposed for longer periods of time, and/or are exposed more

often. The size, shape and chemical makeup of asbestos fibers also are risk factors.

What are the diseases of concern from asbestos exposure at Oak Ridge High School?

Pleural disease and mesothelioma.

What is pleural disease?

It is a scarring of the pleura, the tissue surrounding the lungs and lining the chest cavity. The scarring can grow, constricting the lungs and making it harder to breathe.

What is mesothelioma?

Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer of the lining of the chest and other body cavities. The disease generally claims victims within 18 months of diagnosis.

Sources: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, U.S. EPA

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- [Ongoing asbestos coverage](#)

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