

ELIMINATION OF SILICOSIS: AMERICAS INITIATIVE

WHAT IS SILICA?

Crystalline silica is one of the most common minerals in the earth's crust. Crystalline silica dust is released during numerous operations in which rocks, stones, raw materials, sand, concrete, cement roofing tiles, bricks, pottery, some ores and soils, and silica-containing products are crushed, broken, hammered, drilled, polished, cut, dumped, swept, blown, or subjected to any process that could create visible or invisible dust particles¹.

Inhaled crystalline silica (in the form of quartz or cristobalite) from occupational sources is **classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer as a Group 1 human carcinogen**². This means that occupational inhalation of crystalline silica is known to cause cancer in humans.



WHERE ARE WORKERS POTENTIALLY EXPOSED?

Workers may be exposed to crystalline silica in many different workplaces and processes. These include:

- Mines, quarries, foundries, stone crushing operations, highway repair, masonry workshops
- The construction, excavation, and demolition sites
- The manufacture, etching, and frosting of glass
- Creation of ceramics, stone arts and crafts
- Abrasive powders
- During cleaning and removing paint from ship hulls, stone buildings, metal bridges, and other metal surfaces³.

Exposure to silica dust may occur in unexpected or unknown places. Not all jobs with the risk of silicosis exposure have been identified. Any job that creates respirable dust from a crystalline silica-containing material, whether raw or manufactured, could place workers at risk of silica-related disease. Preventative action should be initiated before exposure occurs.

WHAT IS SILICOSIS?

Silicosis is one of the oldest occupational diseases, yet it still kills thousands of people worldwide each year. **It is an incurable and irreversible lung disease** caused by inhalation of dust containing free crystalline silica.

The global burden of silicosis is substantial. In fact, in 2000 an estimated 8800 deaths and 486,000 disability-adjusted life years were attributed to silicosis⁴. These figures do not include the burden from silica-related lung cancer⁵.

- In one Brazilian state, more than 4500 workers have been diagnosed with silicosis. Among stone carvers crafting souvenir sculptures in Petropolis, Brazil, silicosis had a 53.7 per cent prevalence rate⁶.
- In the USA, it is estimated that more than one million workers are occupationally exposed to free crystalline silica dust each year, some 59,000 of whom will eventually develop silicosis⁷.
- In Quebec, Canada, between 1988 and 1994 40 newly diagnosed workers were compensated for developing silicosis in the workplace. Twelve workers were less than 40 years old⁷.
- The Colombian Government estimates that 1.8 million workers in the country are at risk of developing silicosis⁷.

OTHER CONCERNS

- Silicosis cases and deaths are greatly underreported;
- Lack of primary prevention measures such as controlling dust generation, release and spread into the workplace, and respiratory protection;
- Continuous reports of silica dust exposures in a variety of occupations and industries that are at least several times higher than standards in developed and developing countries;
- Continuous reports of silicosis deaths in young workers in developing and developed countries^{8,9};
- Shortcomings in legislation and inspection for enforcement; and,
- Lack of resources allocated for the prevention of silica dust exposure.

HOW CAN SILICOSIS BE PREVENTED?

Alice Hamilton (1869-1970), a pioneer occupational physician and hygienist who conducted major studies on silicosis in the USA stated: "obviously the way to attack silicosis is to prevent the formation and escape of dust"⁷.

Diagnosis and health surveillance are essential components of any silicosis elimination programme. Although medical and radiological examinations can only detect and not prevent silicosis, these are important complements to primary prevention. Surveillance should be considered a supplement for control strategies and never as a replacement for primary prevention.

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GLOBAL RESPONSE

The International Labor Organization/World Health Organization (ILO/WHO) International Programme on the Global Elimination of Silicosis was launched in 1995 and calls for the elimination of silicosis worldwide by 2030⁷. It includes:

- formulation of national, regional and global action plans;
- mobilization of resources for the application of primary and secondary prevention;
- epidemiological surveillance;
- monitoring and evaluation of results; and
- strengthening required national capabilities and the establishment of national programmes.

The programme will depend heavily on cooperation between international organizations, industrialized and developing countries.

In light of the worldwide magnitude of occupational exposure to dust, the prevalence of silicosis and other occupational dust-related diseases, as well as an acute need for increased preventive action, WHO has initiated the Prevention and Control Exchange (PACE) initiative in developing countries. These training programmes aim to prevent and control dust exposure in the work environment.

As an initial step in the PACE initiative, WHO has prepared a basic document addressing topics such as:

- characteristics of dust and its sources;
- problem recognition and evaluation;
- available technical and personal measures to prevent or control the generation, release and dissemination of dust in the workplace; and
- integration of control measures into effective and sustainable programmes.

AMERICAS SILICOSIS INITIATIVE

In 2005, WHO, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Chilean Ministry of Health and ILO requested that the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) provide capacity-building technical assistance to eliminate silicosis in the Americas. The Americas Silicosis Initiative was born as a partnership between WHO, PAHO, ILO, Chile, Brazil, and Peru. This initiative is the first regional approach to mitigate silicosis and is based upon sharing expertise to benefit workers and communities of many countries.

In 2008, the Peruvian National Institute of Health/National Center for Occupational Health and Environmental Protection (CENSOPAS) asked NIOSH for training to measure occupational exposure to heavy metals (e.g. lead, cadmium, arsenic, selenium) and crystalline silica, to describe and record the adverse health effects of crystalline silica exposure as well as control banding. A NIOSH team of experts provided a comprehensive 40 hour technical short course at CENSOPAS for CENSOPAS professionals, PAHO, and organizations in Colombia, Venezuela, and Bolivia.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Americas Silicosis Initiative has been very successful in the countries in which it was implemented, as trained professionals continue to characterize, prevent and control exposure to crystalline silica in the workplace. With the cooperation of the various Ministries, adapting and scaling this initiative in other countries in the region will broadly enhance workers' health while meeting the global silicosis elimination target.

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