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Panel Rejects Talc From Cancer List

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By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- A panel of federal scientific advisers, having concluded that talc powder doesn't cause cancer, is turning its attention to the hazards of estrogen and wood dust.

The National Toxicology Program advisory committee is considering whether to recommend that steroidal estrogen -- the type used in post-menopausal treatments -- should be added to the federal list of cancer-causing agents because of an association with endometrial cancer and breast cancer.

And an association between cancers of the nose and sinuses and the concentrations of wood dust in industrial uses has the group considering adding that dust to the cancer-causing list.

On Thursday, after a daylong debate, the group declined to add talc power to the list and deadlocked over whether to list a type of fibrous talc.

Some studies have associated the use of talc in feminine hygiene products with ovarian cancer. But the scientists voted 7-3 that the evidence wasn't convincing enough.

The committee of scientists advises the National Toxicology Program, a branch of the National Institutes of Health that every two years updates the federal list of proven and suspected cancer-causing substances.

On Wednesday, the panel voted to add ultraviolet radiation -- those sunburn-causing rays long known to cause skin cancer -- to the official carcinogen list.

The NTP typically follows its advisers' recommendations, but an officially updated carcinogen list isn't expected until 2002.

Talc has long been controversial. When studies first appeared suggesting it migrated into the ovaries to cause tumors, many feminine hygiene products replaced talc with cornstarch.

One panelist, Michelle Medinsky, a toxicologist from Durham, N.C., said she had been prepared to vote to list talc as a substance "reasonably believed to cause cancer."

But after listening to hours of industry attacks on the science, "the evidence has knocked me out of the 'reasonably' category into 'not list,'" she said before the panel voted.

The scientists scrutinized two forms of talc. One form is widely used in the home and cosmetics while the second, fibrous talc -- also known as asbestiform talc -- has a variety of applications. It has been associated with lung cancer in miners, though industry analysts challenge that.

The panel deadlocked on whether fibrous talc caused lung cancer, voting 5-5 on adding it to the federal list.

Talc in one form or the other can be found in many papers, paints, ceramics, food wrappers, hard candy, chewing gum, cosmetics and pills.

Most people are familiar with talc as a loose powder used in cosmetics and as a drying powder.

Industry officials on Thursday attacked studies that showed increased lung cancer in talc miners in New York State, questioned an experiment that showed that rats breathing high concentrations of talc got lung cancer and questioned whether talc can really be associated with ovarian cancer.

The group struggled particularly with the definition of asbestiform talc, with speakers stressing that while some talc is itself formed in fibers or may contain minerals in fiber shapes, it does not contain asbestos. In fact, while talc was at one time contaminated with asbestos, the industry in 1976 set a voluntary standard aimed at eliminating that problem.

"There should be no guilt by association," said John Addison, representing the European Trade Association for Talc Producers.

Higher lung-cancer rates in talc miners may have resulted from their smoking or from the presence of radon gas in the mines or asbestos in soils nearby, industry officials said.

UV light, however, was a no-brainer for the panel, which voted unanimously that it was a known human carcinogen.

UV radiation is not visible, but it is felt as heat and can damage the eyes and skin. It comes in three forms, ranging from the relatively long-wavelength UVA to the shortest wavelength UVC. UVA

accounts for most of the solar UV radiation because it is not absorbed by the atmosphere. UVB is mostly absorbed by the ozone layer and UVC is totally absorbed.

All three are produced by mercury arc sun lamps, while other lamps that simulate sunlight produce primarily UVA.