

Hundreds of deaths spur ministry plan to ban all asbestos use by 2008

The health ministry said Friday it plans to ban all use of asbestos by 2008 after recent announcements that hundreds of workers at various companies have died from diseases related to the toxic unburnable mineral.

The domestic use of asbestos is banned in principle, except in cases where there are no substitutes. Asbestos is therefore still used to make gaskets for machinery, insulating plates for switchboards, seals for chemical plants and industrial rope.

Japan's asbestos imports have fallen from their peak of 350,000 tons in 1974 to 8,000 tons last year, and are expected to fall further to just several dozen tons this year as the manufacturing and other industries develop substitutes.

Next year, the health ministry plans to set up a panel to discuss asbestos and revise legislation to have it completely banned by 2008.

On Friday, Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Hidehisa Otsuji said the ministry would investigate companies where such deaths have been reported, facilitate processing of industrial insurance claims, and offer consultations at local health centers.

The ministry also will instruct companies to conduct health checks on current and retired employees and reinforce protection for workers involved in demolishing buildings insulated with asbestos.

The government's sudden interest in asbestos was sparked by recent announcements from Kubota Corp., Nichias Corp. and other companies that former workers who handled the substance have died from diseases related to it. Revelations also surfaced about spouses of people working with asbestos and residents living near plants involved in asbestos also being victims.

24 at Misawa Resort die

Misawa Resort Co. added 24 workers Friday to the tally of people killed at construction materials manufacturers and related companies by lung diseases linked to asbestos, bringing the total death toll to 330.

The resort business under the Misawa Homes Co. group said the 24 were employed by and worked at a plant of one of its previous companies that manufactured asbestos tubes for use in agricultural and sewage water.

They have died since 1982 due to mesothelioma, pneumoconiosis and other asbestos-linked diseases.

The predecessor, established in 1931, produced asbestos tubes since 1933 at the three plants, in Saitama, Kagawa and Saga prefectures. Output was suspended in 1985.

It went under the control of Nihon Cement Co., the predecessor of Taiheiyo Cement Corp., in 1955 before joining the Misawa Homes group in 1987.

The Japan Times: July 9, 2005

(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)