Toxic drywall

Concerns have been raised that some imported drywall, suspected of containing sulfur compounds, is emitting toxic gases. These gases can cause upper respiratory problems (in some cases severe) and corrosion of electrical, plumbing, and HVAC components.

Is toxic drywall being used in British Columbia?

The drywall was imported from China between 2001 and 2007 to address the demand for residential construction in the United States following several hurricanes, particularly Katrina and Rita. Some of the drywall was imported into Canada via the Port of Vancouver. This material appears to have been shipped to the Prairies and Toronto; however, some B.C. use cannot be ruled out.

According to the Greater Vancouver Homebuilders' Association, "toxic drywall" has not shown up on any B.C. residential construction sites. In addition, the British Columbia Wall and Ceiling Association hasn't encountered any reports of toxic drywall.

What is the problem with the drywall?

Investigations are under way in several U.S. states. So far, laboratory chamber testing has shown that the drywall does emit carbon disulfide, carbonyl sulfide, and hydrogen sulfide. Copper components placed in the test chamber were corroded by the gases.

Testing within some of the affected houses in the U.S. also revealed the presence of sulfur-containing gases; however, the levels were orders of magnitude below the current WorkSafeBC occupational exposure limits.

What are the health issues?

The health effects of exposure are mainly upper respiratory and include eye and throat irritation, shortness of breath, nosebleeds, and dizziness. These effects seem to be associated with private residences, rather than workplaces, and are linked to a noticeable "rotten egg" or sulfur smell.

In the U.S. there have been no reported health concerns from workers who installed the material. The health effects seem to be restricted to homeowners over a long-term period.

How can you reduce the risk of any worker exposure?

- Employers in buildings that were constructed or renovated between 2001 and 2007 can contact the contractor or builder to see if any of the drywall was used.
- If upper respiratory problems have been reported, an investigation should be conducted (e.g., testing for sulfide gases). Sulfide emissions from this drywall can be treated as an indoor air quality problem, no different from the emission of formaldehyde from building materials.
- If testing shows that sulfide gases are present, then the suspect drywall should be replaced.