

Regulatory Compliance

Lawmakers Call for OSHA Emphasis Program After CDC Report on Silicosis Among Stone Fabrication Workers

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Washington — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is warning of “an emerging public health threat” after researchers identified an increase in cases of *silicosis* – an incurable lung disease – among workers who handle engineered stone used to make household countertops.

Silicosis is caused by inhaling particles of crystalline silica. Researchers identified 18 silicosis cases between 2017 and 2019 involving stone fabrication workers in four states using a California hospital’s discharge data, a Colorado physician’s review of electronic medical records, a report of an apparent cluster of cases among workers at an engineered stone countertop manufacturing and fabrication facility in Texas, and routine surveillance of workers’ compensation data in Washington state.

Previously, only one silicosis case had been reported in the United States, the report notes. Most of the 18 workers regularly worked with engineered stone – a manufactured, quartz-based composite product that can contain more than 90% crystalline silica. Among them, two died – the first reported U.S. fatalities linked to silicosis – several had a severe progressive form of the disease, and some had associated autoimmune diseases and latent tuberculosis infection.

MMWR | Silicosis in Stone Fabrication Workers

Silicosis	Workers are at risk	How to protect workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incurable lung disease • Occurs after breathing silica dust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 cases in 4 states • 2 deaths • Most worked with engineered stone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control and monitor exposures • Comply with standards • Conduct medical screening

Cases identified in CA, CO, WA, and TX through surveillance and case reports as published in Rose, Heinzerling, et al. MMWR 2019. bit.ly/CDCVA21

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“Silica dust exposure reduction and effective regulatory enforcement, along with enhanced workplace medical and public health surveillance, are urgently needed,” the report states.

In response to the report, Reps. Bobby Scott (D-VA), chair of the House Education and Labor Committee, and Alma Adams (D-NC), chair of the House Workforce Protections Subcommittee, on Oct. 7 sent a **letter** to Secretary of Labor Eugene Scalia, urging OSHA to enhance monitoring and protections for engineered stone fabrication workers at high risk of silicosis and other silica-related diseases.

"We are calling on OSHA to issue, without delay, a new [National Emphasis Program] that focuses on engineered stone fabrication establishments," Scott and Adams wrote. "Absent timely action, OSHA will be failing these stone finishing workers and failing in its mission."

The researchers recommend employers control and monitor worker exposure in compliance with respirable crystalline silica standards, as well as conduct medical screenings.

The study was *published online* Sept. 27 in CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

Previously Featured in Safety and Health Magazine.

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