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New doubts cast on safety of common driveway sealant

Extremely high levels of toxic chemical in coal tar found in booming suburb

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If a company dumped the black goop behind a factory, it would violate all sorts of environmental laws and face an expensive hazardous-waste cleanup.

But playgrounds, parking lots and driveways in many communities are coated every spring and summer with coal tar, a toxic byproduct of steelmaking that contains high levels of chemicals linked to cancer and other health problems.

Nearly two decades after industry pressured the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to exempt coal tar-based pavement sealants from anti-pollution laws, a growing number of government and academic studies are questioning the safety of the widely used products. Research shows that the tar steadily wears off and crumbles into contaminated dust that is tracked into houses and washed into lakes.

In Lake in the Hills, a fast-growing McHenry County suburb about 50 miles northwest of Chicago, researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey found that driveway dust was contaminated with extremely high levels of benzo(a)pyrene, one of the most toxic chemicals in coal tar. The amount was 5,300 times higher than the level that triggers an EPA Superfund cleanup at polluted industrial sites.

High levels also were detected in dust collected from parking lots and driveways in Austin, Texas; Detroit; Minneapolis; New Haven, Conn., and suburban Washington, D.C. By contrast, dramatically lower levels were found in Portland, Ore.; Salt Lake City and Seattle, Western cities where pavement sealants tend to be made with asphalt instead of coal tar.

The findings raise new concerns about potential health threats to people and aquatic life that went undetected for years.

"This is a real eye-opener, even for scientists who work frequently with these chemicals," said Barbara Mahler, a USGS researcher involved in the studies. "Such high concentrations usually are found at Superfund sites, but this could be your church parking lot or your school playground or even your own driveway."

About 85 million gallons of coal tar-based sealants are sold in the United States each year, according to industry estimates. There are no comprehensive figures on where it is applied, but in Lake in the Hills, researchers determined that 89 percent of the driveways are covered in coal tar.