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DEVICE MEASURES INSULATION FUMES

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WASHINGTON, March 3 -- Homeowners worried about formaldehyde fumes from foam insulation are buying a silver-dollar-size badge that can help determine if they have a health problem.

The Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, which says it is the only concern selling such a device for home use, reports that both sales and production have risen in the wake of adverse publicity about urea formaldehyde foam insulation.

Installation of the insulation was prohibited last week by the Consumer Product Safety Commission on the ground that it poses a health hazard. The action left the owners of more than 500,000 homes where the product is already in place wondering if they are exposed.

The National Insulation Institute, an association of manufacturers and installers, has said that it will seek to overturn the commission action, which, it maintains, could drive down the value of some of the structures in which the material has been installed.

The commission's official advice is that occupants who have suffered no symptoms - frequent eye, nose and throat irritation, coughing, shortness of breath, headaches and dizziness - have no problem.

A member of the commission, Samuel D. Zagoria, has suggested that the 3M Company's device is a good way to check the level of formaldehyde fumes. Developed for industrial applications and usable only once, it is to be kept in a central location - clipped on a lamp shade, for example - for 24 hours and then returned to the company for analysis. The company informs the buyer of the reading by mail but does not say whether any particular level is hazardous.

While the risk level for formaldehyde has not been officially determined, the results can be taken to a physician or a local health department for evaluation that could prove helpful.

At a minimum, the device will indicate the presence of the gas, which, if accompanied by the symptoms, would suggest a possible problem.

Health officials in Minnesota, for example, are telling consumers that the "risk is lower at .4 parts per million." The 3M device detects levels down to .1 parts per million.

According to preliminary findings of the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology, a North Carolina research group, cancers have developed in laboratory animals exposed over long periods to formaldehyde at a concentration of six parts to 15 parts per million.

The company, which has not manufactured the insulation, said the suggested price for the device, including the laboratory analysis, is \$35 plus local sales taxes.

The price may be higher in some areas because dealers add handling charges. Those ordering the device or seeking information about it may write to 3M, Box 43157, St. Paul, Minn. 55164.

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