



**NORTH DAKOTA**  
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

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## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:  
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### **State Health Department and EPA Announce Completion of Study To Determine Health Risks Associated With Erionite in Gravel**

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced today that a study measuring the risk of breathing dust from gravel containing the fiber erionite has been completed.

The investigation did not find an increase in mesothelioma, a cancer that is the most serious outcome associated with exposure to asbestos-like dust. However, the study results do suggest that occupational exposure to road gravel containing erionite, especially for workers employed in road maintenance or gravel pits, can result in changes to the tissue of the lung or to the pleura (the thin membrane that lines the outside of the lungs and the inside of the chest). The types of changes found by the study are consistent with those seen with commercial asbestos exposure.

The absence of mesothelioma does not prove that there is no increased risk since the size of the population in the area is small and sufficient time may not have passed to ensure cases will not develop in the future. Because of the lung changes found in the study, the Department of Health continues to recommend that efforts be made to keep erionite gravel dust exposure in these areas as low as possible.

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Erionite is a fibrous mineral with some properties similar to asbestos but is not regulated as a form of asbestos. Like asbestos, erionite may pose health risks to those who breathe in the fibers.

The medical study was initiated after the North Dakota Geological Survey investigated naturally occurring erionite deposits in rural areas near the Killdeer Mountains, Chalky Buttes and Little Badlands areas in Dunn, Slope and Stark counties. The erionite-containing gravel deposits have been used for gravel sources for rural county roads and other areas for several decades.

Thirty-four volunteers participated in the medical study, which began in March 2009. The participants had to meet specific criteria related to employment history, work locations, exposure time and other variables. The study was conducted by medical investigators from the University of Cincinnati.

Three years ago, the Department of Health issued recommendations to discontinue using gravel that contains erionite, and the North Dakota Department of Transportation has made that a requirement for state road projects. Dunn, Slope and Stark counties are working to follow the state recommendations and identify alternative sources of gravel. The city of Killdeer has removed affected gravel from several public areas, including the baseball diamond and the swimming pool parking lot. The Department of Health is planning a meeting with a group of stakeholders – including the North Dakota Department of Transportation; the EPA; the University of Cincinnati; and officials from Dunn, Slope and Stark counties – to discuss the study and to develop plans to further address this issue.

A copy of the report is available at [www.ndhealth.gov/EHS/erionite](http://www.ndhealth.gov/EHS/erionite). For more information, contact Scott Radig or Mark Dihle, North Dakota Department Health, at 701.328.5188 or Steve Way, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, at 303.312.6723.

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