

Dust Exposure and Respiratory Health Effects in Cement Production

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Received: 25 Feb. 2011; Received in revised form: 15 Aug. 2011 ; Accepted: 9 Nov. 2011

Abstract- Dust can be produced by almost all production processes in Portland cement factory. Dust exposure potentially can affect respiratory function. But evidence for respiratory effect of cement dust exposure has not been conclusive. In this study we assessed effect of cement dust exposure on respiratory function in a cement production factory. A respiratory symptoms questionnaire was completed and pulmonary function tests were carried out on 94 exposed and 54 non exposed workers at a cement factory in the east of Iran. Additionally, respirable dust level was determined by the gravimetric method. X-ray fluorescence (XRF) technique was performed to determine the silica phases and the SiO₂ contents of the bulk samples. The arithmetic means (AM) of personal respirable dust were 30.18 mg/m³ in the crushing, 27 mg/m³ in the packing, 5.4 mg/m³ in the cement mill, 5.9 mg/m³ in the kiln and 5.48 mg/m³ in the maintenance that were higher than threshold limit value (TLV) of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) which is 5 mg/m³. This value in the unexposed group was 0.93 mg/m³. In this study cough, sputum, wheezing and dyspnea were more prevalent among exposed subjects. Exposed workers compared to the unexposed group showed significant reduction in Forced Expiratory Volume in one second (FEV₁), Forced Vital Capacity (FVC), and Forced Expiratory Flow between 25% and 75% of the FVC (FEF_{25-75%}) (*P*<0.05). It can be concluded that in our study there was close and direct association between cement dust exposure and functional impairment among the cement factory workers.

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Acta Medica Iranica, 2012; 50(2): 122-126.

Keywords: Portland cement dust; Respirable dust; Respiratory symptoms; Respiratory impairment; Iran

Introduction

Portland cement production is a dusty process. Portland cement is manufactured from a clay and limestone mixture that is calcined in kiln. Portland cement silicate is a class of hydraulic cements containing tri- and dicalcium silicate (2CaO.SiO₂ and 3CaO.SiO₂) in addition to aluminum, tricalcium aluminate and iron oxide. The final product usually contains 60 to 70% calcium oxide, 19 to 24% silicon dioxide (including about 5% free), 4 to 7% aluminum trioxide, 2 to 6% ferric oxide and less than 5% magnesium oxide (1). The volume of cement production in Iran is high (60 million tons per year). About 27000 workers are working in cement production factories in Iran. Occupational exposure to cement dust is likely to vary in different production operations and process (2-5). Several clinical

and epidemiological studies have shown an increased incidence of respiratory impairment and high frequency of respiratory symptoms among cement production workers (6-8) but there are some negative studies (9-11). The objectives of this study were to investigate the relationship between occupational exposure to Portland cement dust and respiratory health problem.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted at a local cement producing factory in Iran during the year 2008-2009. This factory is located in Ghaen, which is about 100 kilometers on the outskirts of Birjand. It is the biggest cement company in the east of the country, currently producing about 1000,000 tons of Portland cement annually, and it has around 340 workers. The main

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production process include, crushing, raw milling, calcination in a rotary kiln, cement milling, packing and maintenance. The raw material limestone (60%) and red soil (40%) are crushed before entering the raw mill. It is ground to fine particles. The ground materials enter the rotary kiln (with calcining, transition and burning zones) where it is burning at 1300-1450 °C to form clinker. The clinker is mixed with gypsum (4-5%) and ground in the clinker mill into Portland cement. The final product is stored in silos, and then distributed in bulk or packed.

In this study, 94 male workers (production line workers) were selected in a group-based strategy as exposed group. Similarly, 54 male workers were selected as unexposed group from administrative section employees.

The American Thoracic Society's Questionnaire on Respiratory Symptoms (ATS 1978), with minor modifications, was used in the study. Pulmonary function test including FEV₁, FVC, PEF, and FEF₂₅₋₇₅ indexes were performed with the worker in standing position using a portable calibrated Vitalograph spirometer (Vitalograph-COMPACT, Buckingham, England) according to the ATS recommendation for acceptability and reproducibility (12). Lung function tests were performed with the assistance of a trained, skilled occupational health expert under supervision.

Catching 148 personal samples were planned for both administrative office and production sites (crusher, kiln, cement milling, packing and maintenance). Respirable dust was collected on cellulose acetate filter with pore size of 0.8 µm placed in a 37-mm cyclone (Casella, London, UK) connected to a SKC sampling pump with flow rate of 0.2 l/min, calibrated by a digital automatic calibrator. The samples were transported to Tehran and were analyzed quantitatively at Occupational Health lab, Tehran University of Medical Sciences. Gravimetric analysis using a microbalance with a detection limit of 0.01 mg was employed.

The x-ray fluorescence (XRF) technique was used to determine and estimate the silica phases and the SiO₂

content of the bulk sample.

A database file created and all statistical analyses were carried out with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 13.5 for Windows. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

All of 148 subjects (94 exposed and 54 unexposed) were male. Table 1 shows a summary of the demographic parameters of the exposed and unexposed groups. As shown in the table, there was no clinically or statistically significant difference between two groups.

Worker of crushing and packing had higher respirable dust exposure than the cement mill, kiln, maintenance and administration (Table 2). The mean air concentration of respirable dust for exposed group was 11.96 mg/m³ (SD=14.69) that exceeded the recommended TLV based on the ACGIH for nuisance respirable particles, which is 5 mg/m³ (13). To estimate the silica phases and the SiO₂ content of the bulk materials 16 bulk samples collected and XRF technique was used. Results are illustrated in Table 2.

Respiratory symptoms questionnaire was completed by 56 exposed and 35 unexposed subjects. Table 3 illustrates the frequency of abnormal respiratory symptoms among exposed and unexposed subjects. Exposed workers had more dyspnea, sputum, wheezing and cough than the control group. But these differences were not statistically significant (Table 3).

Pulmonary function parameters are measured for all exposed (n=94) and unexposed (n=54) subjects. Mean FVC and FEV₁ for exposed group were 3.86 and 3.10 with predicted values equal to 4.85 and 3.71 respectively. These indices for unexposed group were 4.17 and 3.42 with predicted values as same as exposed group. The results indicated that the exposed workers had significantly lower ventilatory indices than the unexposed workers (Tables 4).

Table 1. Comparison of demographic variables between exposed and unexposed groups.

	Exposed (n=94)			Unexposed (n=54)			P value
	Mean	Min.	Max.	Mean	Min.	Max.	
Height (meter)	1.70	1.58	1.90	1.70	1.55	1.90	0.7
Age (year)	41.7	26	62	40.9	27	53	0.37
Weight (kilogram)	75.7	52	105	77.2	52	105	0.4
Working duration (year)	14.8	3	25	14.2	2	27	0.51
Smoking (pack year)	4.24	0	13	4.49	0	15	0.7

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Table 2. Respirable dust (mg/m³) and SiO₂% content of bulk materials in the cement factory.

	Number of sample	Mean (SD)
Respirable dust		
Ore crushing	15	30.2 (22.1)
Kiln	21	5.9 (3.7)
Packing	9	27 (16.6)
Cement mill	10	5.4 (4)
Maintenance	39	5.5(4.3)
Administration	54	0.9 (0.8)
SiO₂% content		
Lime stone	4	7 (.8)
Bauxite	4	27 (2.2)
Kiln feed	4	15 (1.4)
Clinker	4	22 (1.4)

Table 3. Frequency of respiratory symptoms among exposed and unexposed subjects.

Symptom	Exposed (n=56)		Unexposed (n=35)		P value
	Number	Percent	Number	Present	
Cough	34	60.7	15	42.9	0.1
Wheezing	23	41.1	9	25.7	0.14
Sputum	21	37.5	9	25.7	0.25
Dyspnea	25	44.6	11	32.4	0.25

Table 4. Pulmonary function indices and abnormal pulmonary function parameters frequency in exposed and unexposed workers.

Indices	Exposed		Unexposed		P value
	Measured	Predicted	Measured	Predicted	
FVC	3.86	4.85	4.17	4.85	0.006 ^a
FEV ₁	3.1	3.71	3.42	3.71	0.000 ^a
FEV ₁ /FVC	0.79	---	0.82	---	0.006 ^a
FEF ₂₅₋₇₅	3.13	4.23	3.94	4.25	0.000 ^a
Abnormal parameters	number	percent	number	percent	
FVC ^b	55	58.5	12	22.2	0.000
FEV ₁ ^b	46	48.9	4	7.4	0.000
FEV ₁ /FVC ^c	38	40.4	16	29.6	0.19

a: comparison for measured values

b: measured indices less than %80 of predicted values

c: measured FEV₁ less than %80 of measured FVC

Discussion

In our study, there were no significant differences in the major confounding variables of demographic, cigarette smoking and duration of work between exposed and unexposed subjects. Workers who work in crusher and packing process are exposed to the highest AM concentrations of respirable cement dust (30.17 mg/m³ and 27.72 mg/m³) while the cement mill and maintenance process workers were exposed the lowest one (5.4 mg/m³). This variation in dust exposure in different parts of the factory was predictable and is

consistent with previous studies (2-5). Data analysis exhibited that the mean respirable dust concentration in exposed group exceeded the ACGIH TLV of 5 mg/m³ (13). The levels of respirable cement dust observed in the current study are higher than observed in developed countries such as United States (14) and Norway (11). In our study the frequency of wheezing, cough, dyspnea and chronic phlegm among the exposed workers were higher than control group in parallel to other reports (15,16) but these differences were not statistically significant. This may be because of low sample size in our study.

The major finding of this study is that the lung function parameters FVC, FEV₁ and FEF_{25-75%} were significantly lower in exposed workers compared to control group. This is consistent with the finding of Poornajaf *et al.* (17), Ali *et al.* (18), Merenu *et al.* (19), Alakija *et al.* (20) as well as Omer *et al.* (21). In contrast, some other studies did not find such effects probably due to low respirable dust exposure among the cement workers (10,11,14). However, the frequency of abnormal FEV₁/FVC ratio did not differ statistically significant in the exposed workers compared to the control group. It may be the reflection of this fact that occupational inhalation exposure to cement dust is likely to induce restrictive rather than obstructive ventilatory impairment. This result is in agreement with the finding of El Badri1 and Saeed (21). Data and information presented in current study might be useful for national programs of health surveillance and retrospective exposure assessment. In conclusion, exposure to airborne respirable cement dust was high in our study. This may be attributed in part to the fact that the process flow and machinery are often old and assembled without effective dust control devices such as electrostatic precipitator. It can be also concluded that exposure to the cumulative cement dust is associated with chronic ventilatory function impairment. Data and information presented in current study might be useful for national programs of health surveillance and retrospective exposure assessment. With respect to high dust exposure in our study national programs of cement dust exposure assessment and health surveillance are strongly recommended.

Acknowledgment

We thank the general manager, head of board of management of cement factory, the occupational health director, and particularly the workers who participated in carrying this study.

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