Dry Cleaner Safety Fatality File

Cancer Danger from Dry Cleaning

As Early Show national correspondent Tracy Smith points out, there’s nothing dry about dry cleaning at all. Clothes are actually washed, in a solvent, one the federal Environmental Protection Agency calls it a possible-to-probable carcinogen, and you could be breathing it in, without even knowing it.

That was what happened with Mori Mickelson and her husband, Danny O’Brien.

The more they stayed inside their New York City apartment, the sicker they got.

“I would get dizzy, I would get headaches, just feel nauseous,” Mickelson told Smith.

It turned out, Smith reports, that the air in their apartment was contaminated with a toxic solvent leaking from the dry cleaner downstairs.

It’s called perchloroethylene, or PERC, and it’s used by three out of four dry cleaners nationwide.

But, too often, PERC vapors can leak into nearby residences and offices, and Schreiber says long-term exposure can cause serious harm.

“You’re at risk for neurological effects, liver and kidney illness, and increased cancer risk,” she says.

The World Health Organization says PERC is a “probable human carcinogen.”

The EPA classifies it as somewhere between a “possible” and “probable” human carcinogen, though at high dosages and over a

long period of time. The agency doesn’t say brief exposure to PERC, or long-term exposure to very low levels of the chemical will cause cancer. But the EPA admits studies of the carcinogenic effects of PERC in the general population don’t exist. The EPA is currently doing a “risk assessment” of PERC, evaluating all research into its potential health effects, and plans to release its findings in about two years.

According to the EPA’s Web site, “Breathing PERC for short periods of time can adversely affect the human nervous system. Effects range from dizziness, fatigue, headaches, and sweating, to incoordination and unconsciousness. Contact with PERC vapor irritates the skin, eyes, nose, and throat. These effects are not likely to occur at levels of PERC that are normally found in the environment. Breathing PERC over longer periods of time can cause liver and kidney damage in humans. Workers repeatedly exposed to large amounts of PERC in air can also experience memory loss and confusion. Laboratory studies show that PERC causes kidney and liver damage and cancer in animals exposed repeatedly by inhalation and by mouth. Repeat exposure to large amounts of PERC in air may likewise cause cancer in humans.”

You may have gotten a whiff of PERC’s strong, fresh scent at your cleaners but, once PERC evaporates into the air, you can’t always smell it.

Mickelson had no idea her home was so contaminated until, one day, she literally collapsed from the fumes, and was rushed to the hospital.