



April 19, 2008

Fake turf's lead content at issue

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Athletic directors at several local high schools say they don't know of any health concerns caused by their artificial turf fields, but a local consumer advocate is calling for a stop to installing synthetic athletic surfaces.

Despite the recent closing of two nylon turf fields in New Jersey because of "unexpectedly high levels" of lead, area athletic directors say they are not concerned about their fields.

Lead, however, may not be the only concern.

Judy Braiman, president of Rochesterians Against the Misuse of Pesticides, said her group examined several high school turf fields and concluded that no artificial field was safe.

"They shouldn't play on these turf fields, that's how concerned parents, coaches and these athletes should be," said Braiman, a Brighton resident who added there's legislation in place for a state-wide moratorium on artificial turf fields.

East Rochester was the first Section V high school to install an artificial turf field, in 2001. It is used for football, soccer, lacrosse and field hockey.

"It's dangerous to assume that all turf fields should be shut down, just because a couple of fields were," said Mark Michele, ER athletic director.

"This is cause for concern, though. Schools should follow protocol and assess what, if any, the toxicity of their turf field is."

ER, Brighton, Aquinas and Irondequoit are among more than a dozen area schools with turf fields or all-weather tracks.

ER's field was designed by Astro Play, a sub-division of Astro Turf. The surface is made of polypropylene, a type of field turf designed to closely represent natural grass, Michele said.

Earlier this week, the two New Jersey fields, made primarily from nylon fibers, were closed after state health officials detected what they said were unexpectedly high levels of lead and raised fears that athletes could swallow or inhale fibers or dust from the playing surface.

The artificial turf industry denied its products are dangerous. But the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission is looking into the possible health hazards of lead in artificial turf.

The United States has about 3,500 synthetic playing fields made of various materials, including nylon and polyethylene. Polyethylene turf contains tiny rubber pellets from crushed tires, or sneaker rubber. The New Jersey Health Department found lead in both nylon fields tested, but in

none of 10 polyethylene surfaces it examined.

The FieldTurf surface at Irondequoit, similar to East Rochester's Astro Play, was installed in the spring of 2005.

"I haven't had anyone contact me to test it," said Irondequoit athletic director David Green. "There were some questions raised last fall but I have not been contacted personally to test it."

Polyethylene fields are more modern and have more give than the older Astro Turf, according to Darren Gill, director of marketing for FieldTurf, which has installed more than 2,500 fields.

"Nylon-type fields are rarely manufactured now; about 99.9 percent being made are polyethylene, which is a safer style of turf," said Gill, a Montreal resident whose Montreal-based company has installed artificial turf fields at PAETEC Park, University of Rochester's Fauver Stadium, Rochester Sports Garden in Henrietta, Syracuse University's Carrier Dome, Irondequoit and Aquinas.

Braiman said her group tested components of fields including those at Aquinas, Brighton, East Rochester and Irondequoit.

"The solution," Braiman said, "is natural surfaces, real dirt and grass maintained without pesticides. There's no safe synthetic turf field. They spread hazardous chemicals that should be on hazardous waste sites, not where our children play."

Penfield, Fairport and Lyons are among schools considering adding artificial fields. Brighton's is the most recent.

"It's still a hot commodity, especially in the Northeast," aid Irondequoit's Green.

"We've had no complaints. We're on the turf a lot. All the research that I've seen, there hasn't been any credible evidence regarding toxins."

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Includes reporting by staff writer James Johnson and The Associated Press.
