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FACT SHEET

Crumb-Rubber Infilled Synthetic Turf Athletic Fields

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PURPOSE

There are several kinds of synthetic turf surfaces (*e.g.*, surfaces that use a fill material (“infill”) between the blades of artificial grass and those that do not), and synthetic turf may be installed for different uses (*e.g.*, single or multiple sport athletic fields, landscaping, golf applications). The focus of this fact sheet is athletic fields with crumb rubber infilled synthetic turf. This fact sheet was developed to assist people in making decisions about installing or using this kind of synthetic turf athletic field. Considerations related to other kinds of synthetic turf fields are not addressed in this fact sheet.

BACKGROUND

The first well-publicized use of AstroTurf, a synthetic turf for athletic fields, was at the Houston Astrodome in 1966. This first generation of synthetic turf was essentially a short pile carpet with a foam backing. Since then, design changes have resulted in a greater variety of synthetic turf athletic fields. One type of synthetic turf is fabricated using synthetic fibers, manufactured to resemble natural grass, and a base material that stabilizes and cushions the playing surface. The fibers are typically made from nylon, polypropylene or polyethylene and are connected to a backing material. The base material, also called infill, consists of one or more granular materials that are worked in between the fibers during the installation process. Commonly used base materials are granulated crumb rubber (usually from used tires), flexible plastic pellets, sand, and rubber-coated sand. A combination of sand and crumb rubber is often used.

Crumb rubber is produced by grinding used tires. Steel and fiber tire components are removed during the process and the rubber pellets are sorted by size. Pellet sizes ranging from about one-sixteenth to one-quarter inch in diameter are used on synthetic turf. Crumb rubber is typically applied at a rate of two to three pounds per square foot of field surface.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Some potential health and safety considerations related to synthetic turf have generated public concern.

These include:

- Heat stress
- Injury
- Infection
- Latex allergy
- Chemical exposure

Heat Stress

Synthetic turf fields absorb heat, resulting in surface temperatures that are much higher than the temperatures of the surrounding air. In June 2002 at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Utah, the average surface temperature on a synthetic turf field was reported to be 117°F while the average surface temperatures on natural turf and asphalt were 78°F and 110°F, respectively. A maximum surface temperature of 200°F on the BYU synthetic turf field was reported. A turfgrass specialist at the University of Missouri reported measuring an air temperature of 138°F at “head-level” height on the university’s synthetic turf field on a sunny 98°F day. The surface temperature of the field was reported to be 178°F. A study conducted at Penn State University measured surface temperatures on experimental plots of nine different types of infilled turf. Temperature measurements were made on three occasions. The average air temperatures reported were 79°, 78°, and 85°F. The corresponding average surface temperatures reported for the synthetic turf plots are 120°, 130° and 146°F.

Water can be applied to synthetic turf to reduce the surface temperatures on warm days. A study at BYU found that watering synthetic turf lowered the surface temperature from 174°F to 85°F, but the temperature rose to 120°F in five minutes and to 164°F in twenty minutes. A study conducted by Penn State University on experimental synthetic turf plots examined the effect of watering synthetic turf on surface temperature. Measurements were made on three occasions. For one monitoring period, surface temperatures ranging from about 130° to 160°F were lowered initially to about 75°F, but increased within 30 minutes to temperatures ranging from about 90° to 120°F, where they remained fairly stable for the three-hour monitoring period.

The surface temperatures reported on synthetic turf fields can get high enough to reach levels of discomfort and may contribute to heat stress among users of the fields. While watering synthetic turf may reduce surface temperatures, other factors are likely to influence its effectiveness. At the present time, NYSDOH is unaware of any studies that have examined the role of synthetic turf in contributing to heat stress or that have compared the occurrence of heat stress among athletes playing on natural turf and synthetic turf.

Because of the potential for high temperatures on infilled synthetic turf fields, it is important that people who play or work on the fields be provided with adequate warnings regarding the potential for heat stress. People should also be advised to remain hydrated and to seek relief from the heat in shaded areas. The potential for and frequency of high surface temperatures warrant consideration when making decisions about installing and using a synthetic turf field.

Injury

There is a common perception that there are more sports injuries on synthetic than on natural turf athletic fields. Many factors influence the rate of sports injuries, including the type of playing surface. The many kinds of synthetic turf surfaces and changes in the turf products over the years complicate the assessment of how the playing surface affects injury rates. Other risk factors have been implicated in injury rates among athletes, in addition to the type of playing surface. These risk factors include level of competition, skill level, age, shoe type, previous injury and rehabilitation, and a number of individual physical characteristics. We identified five studies that compared injury (*e.g.*, sprains, lacerations, fractures) rates among athletes when playing on infilled synthetic turf and natural turf fields. Although the ability of the studies to detect differences in the injury rates was limited by the small number of injuries reported, the

studies concluded that there were no major differences in overall injury rates between natural and infilled synthetic turf. Although each study found some differences in specific injury types, there was no consistent pattern across the studies.

The potential for head injuries from contact with the surfaces has been assessed by determining the ability of the surfaces to absorb impacts. Tests have shown that the force of impact on asphalt surfaces is much higher than the level generally accepted to be associated with serious head injury. The force of impact on many types of natural turf and all types of synthetic turf tested are below this level. The force of impact on frozen natural turf is typically above the acceptable level. No data are available for the force of impact on frozen synthetic turf.

The abrasiveness of synthetic turf fibers may contribute to the injury risk among athletes, particularly for abrasions or “turf burns.” The degree of abrasiveness appears to be dependent on the composition and shape of the turf fibers. A study conducted at Penn State University suggests that synthetic turf with nylon fibers is more abrasive than synthetic turf with other types of fibers.

Infection Risk

Some people have expressed concern that infections, including methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), may be more common among users of synthetic turf fields than users of natural turf fields. This possibility has not been studied systematically, and no definitive statements can be made about differences in risk between the two surfaces.

At least two questions are important in evaluating the risk of infection. Does skin damage occur more frequently on synthetic turf than natural turf, thus providing a place where infections are more likely to occur? Are there more germs on synthetic turf than natural turf?

While injury studies have not consistently identified differences in abrasion and laceration risks between natural and infilled synthetic turf, some types of synthetic turf may result in more skin abrasions.

Although very few tests have been performed, the available data do not suggest the widespread presence of infectious agents, such as MRSA, on synthetic turf fields. Also, the available information indicates that outdoor or indoor synthetic turf surfaces are no more likely to harbor infectious agents than other surfaces in those same environments. Disease outbreak investigations conducted in response to illnesses caused by a variety of germs (*e.g.*, MRSA, *Campylobacter*, meningococcus, echovirus, herpes simplex virus, hepatitis virus, coxsackie virus) have not identified playing fields, either natural or synthetic, as likely to increase the risk of transmitting infections.

Skin cuts and abrasions that may result from contact with athletic fields, including both natural and synthetic fields, are susceptible to infection. Athletes and others developing skin abrasions should clean the wounds and seek prompt medical attention. Athletes should avoid sharing towels (on and off the field), equipment, razors, soap and other objects with others, because sharing these items can spread germs.

Latex Allergy

Latex, a substance found in natural rubber, contains substances called “latex allergens,” which can cause an allergic response in some people. About 6 percent of the general population is allergic to the substances in latex. Tire rubber contains the latex allergen, although at much lower levels than in latex

gloves and other consumer products. People playing on synthetic turf may be exposed to latex allergens through direct contact with the skin (dermal exposure) and inhalation of small rubber particles suspended in the air.

A study conducted for the California Environmental Protection Agency tested samples of tire rubber on the skin of guinea pigs. None of the animals developed any rashes or allergic reactions from contact with the rubber.

Whether crumb rubber can cause an allergic response in people is not known. NYSDOH is unaware of any occurrences of latex allergy associated with contact with crumb rubber or synthetic turf fields.

Chemical Exposure

Exposure to a chemical requires contact with it. Contact with a chemical occurs in three ways: swallowing it (ingestion exposure), breathing it (inhalation exposure), and having it come in contact with the skin (dermal exposure) or eyes (ocular exposure). The potential for harmful effects from exposure to a chemical depends on the amount of the chemical a person contacts, how the chemical enters the body (ingestion, inhalation, dermal, or ocular), how often contact occurs, and the toxic properties of the chemical. The ability of a chemical to be released from a substance (*e.g.*, crumb rubber) is an important factor in determining how much exposure actually occurs. Other factors that can influence a person's risk for adverse health effects from environmental chemicals include age, gender, general health, genetic differences, exposure to other chemicals and lifestyle choices.

Tires are manufactured from natural and synthetic rubbers along with numerous chemical additives, including zinc, sulfur, carbon black, and oils that contain polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and volatile organic chemicals. Because crumb rubber is manufactured from used tires, it probably contains the same chemicals as tire rubber.

Studies have been conducted by the California Environmental Protection Agency Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health to assess the potential for ingestion exposure to the chemicals in crumb rubber by children playing on synthetic turf. Both studies concluded that health risks to children resulting from the ingestion of crumb rubber are low.

The Norwegian Institute of Public Health also collected data to assess potential health risks resulting from dermal and inhalation exposures to chemicals contained in synthetic turf fields. Health assessments were conducted for adults and children. The researchers concluded that adverse health effects resulting from dermal exposures to crumb rubber or from inhalation exposures to organic chemicals released from the fields are unlikely. No health assessment of the concentrations of rubber particles in the air was made.

A French study measured the concentrations of organic chemicals emitted as gases (known as volatile organic compounds or VOCs) from crumb rubber under laboratory conditions. The data were used by the French National Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks to evaluate possible health effects from inhaling VOCs released from synthetic turf. The study authors concluded that the concentrations of organic compounds emitted did not pose a health concern for athletes, officials or spectators.

Some kinds of artificial turf have been found to contain elevated levels of lead (*e.g.*, in the range of about 2,000 to 5,000 parts per million (ppm)). The high levels of lead were only found in turf fibers (bulk samples) composed of nylon or a blend of nylon and polyethylene. Degradation of these fibers forms a "dust" that

contains lead. None of the fields with high levels of lead contained infill materials (*e.g.*, crumb rubber). Artificial turf fields with these high levels of lead appear to be older fields installed five or more years ago.

Our review of the available information on crumb rubber and crumb rubber infilled turf fields indicates that ingestion, dermal or inhalation exposures to chemicals in or released from crumb rubber do not pose a significant public health concern.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

A number of other factors may need to be considered when installing and using synthetic turf.

Use: Synthetic turf is more durable than natural turf and can be used without the rest periods that natural turf requires to keep the turf healthy. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR) estimates that on an annual basis, permitted use (hours per year) for synthetic turf athletic fields is 28 percent higher than for natural grass fields.

Installation: Installation costs of synthetic turf vary depending on the amount of site preparation required and the specific field design. The installation costs of synthetic turf are generally much higher than the installation costs of natural turf.

Maintenance: The maintenance costs of synthetic turf will vary depending on the field's use and design, but are typically estimated to be lower than the maintenance costs of natural turf. Natural turf requires regular mowing, fertilizer application, pest control and possibly watering. Synthetic turf requires replacing infill materials, repairing seams and removing weeds and moss. Specialized equipment, which may or may not be included in the field's purchase price, is required for these activities.

Lifetime: NYCDPR estimates that the lifetime of a natural turf field is on the order of five years. The synthetic turf industry estimates that the lifetime of an infilled synthetic turf athletic field is eight to ten years, depending on care during installation and use. NYCDPR and other New York entities have seen similar lifetimes.

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION FOR CRUMB-RUBBER INFILLED SYNTHETIC TURF ATHLETIC FIELDS

Heat stress	Surface temperatures on crumb-rubber infilled synthetic turf fields can reach levels of discomfort and may contribute to heat stress. This warrants consideration when making decisions about installing and using a synthetic turf field. While watering synthetic turf may briefly reduce surface temperatures, a number of factors may influence its effectiveness. People using these fields should be advised to remain hydrated and to seek relief from the heat in shaded areas.
Injury	Overall, studies have found no consistent differences in injury rates between natural and crumb-rubber infilled synthetic turf.
Infection	Skin cuts and abrasions that may result from contact with athletic fields (natural and synthetic turf) are susceptible to infection. Athletes and others developing skin abrasions should clean the wounds and seek prompt medical attention. Athletes should avoid sharing equipment, razors, towels, soap and other objects with others, because these items can spread germs.
Latex allergy	At the present time, NYSDOH is unaware of any occurrences of latex allergy resulting from contact with crumb rubber or synthetic turf fields.
Chemical exposures	Based on the available information, chemical exposures from crumb rubber in synthetic turf do not pose a public health hazard.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

If you have any questions about the information in this fact sheet or would like to know more about in-filled synthetic turf athletic fields, please call the NYSDOH at 1-800-458-1158 or write to the following address:

New York State Department of Health
Bureau of Toxic Substance Assessment
Flanigan Square, 547 River St.
Troy, NY 12180-2216

SOME RELEVANT REFERENCES

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Other Considerations

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