

Cristobalite dusts: on the hazard connected to exposure to such particulate

Di Benedetto F.*¹, Belluso E.², Capella S.², Ardit M.¹, Baroni T.³ & Capacci F.⁴

¹ Dipartimento di Fisica e Scienze della Terra, Università di Ferrara. ² Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra & Centro Interdipartimentale per lo Studio degli Amianti e di altri Particolati Nocivi “Giovanni Scansetti”, Università di Torino.

³ Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra, Università di Firenze. ⁴ formerly at Health Agency of Florence.

Corresponding author e-mail: francesco.dibenedetto@unife.it

Keywords: cristobalite, spectroscopy, health effects.

The long-lasting investigation on the health effects due to exposure of crystalline silica respirable dusts has determined a huge improvement in the knowledge of the specific features able to determine these effects as a variable entity. The molecular and mechanistic foundations of the crystalline silica toxicity have been explored both under controlled laboratory conditions and directly in occupational settings, so as to allow close comparisons between model and actual exposure conditions.

By far, this research has been focused on quartz, the most abundant and ubiquitous silica polymorph (even in the occupational context) while only side research has been carried out on cristobalite, the other natural polymorph having distinctive economic interest. In the past, scientific research focussed mainly on the occupational settings connected with the process of calcination of diatomaceous earth.

This study provides a state-of-the-art review on the mineralogical, physical and chemical characteristics of the cristobalite dusts in some occupational settings, selected on the basis of recently traced epidemiological clusters of silica-related diseases. The aim of this work is the comparison of the results from experimental studies carried out in different contexts where cristobalite is used as raw or byproduct material in industrial production processes. Four different case studies (gold micro-casting, raw materials for artificial stone production, stone workshops, dental alginates production) were investigated by means of in-depth XRD, SEM, TEM, and spectroscopic investigations, evidencing both relevant specificity for each production process and some common features among these different occupational settings. The results suggest that also the toxicological effects of cristobalite should be sought in the organisation of the surface structural terminations (i.e. the nearly free silanols that act as toxicological primer for quartz), in close relationship with the diffused structural defectivity observed in all industrially produced/modified cristobalite materials.