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Caution on Using Tetrahydrofuran for Processing Crystalline Silica Samples from Engineered Stone for XRD Analysis

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Abstract

We conducted laboratory experiments to investigate a suspected effect of tetrahydrofuran (THF) on quantifying crystalline silica in samples collected from working with engineered stone when THF is used to process samples prior to the X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis. Two groups of samples from grinding either engineered stone or granite were simultaneously taken from a laboratory testing system, with one group of samples using THF for processing and another group using muffle furnace for ashing. For each stone type, we also tested four levels of respirable dust loading on the samples by varying the grinding time from one to eight minutes. Statistical analysis of the experimental results on crystalline silica contents of the two groups of samples showed that the difference between the two methods was not significant ($P = 0.05$) for the granite at all four levels of respirable dust loading and for the engineered stone at the two levels of respirable dust loading greater than 0.5 mg. However, the crystalline silica content from using THF processing was significantly lower ($P = 0.001$) than that from using muffle furnace ashing for engineered stone when the respirable dust loading levels were less than 0.5 mg. For the engineered stone dust samples with grinding times of one and two minutes, the average respirable dust loading was about 0.19 and 0.34 mg, respectively; while the crystalline silica content from using THF processing was 30.9% and 21.5% lower than that from using muffle furnace ashing, respectively. Since most full-shift samples from field assessments in this industry are expected to have respirable dust loading less than 0.5 mg, muffle furnace or radio frequency plasma ashing should be specified as the preferred sample processing method instead of the THF processing method for quantification of crystalline silica when engineered stone is expected to present to avoid artificially reduced silica content values, which are likely caused by the reactions between THF and the resins in engineered stone.

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Keywords

engineered stone; crystalline silica; tetrahydrofuran

Introduction

Engineered stone has become increasingly popular among consumers in recent years and is one of the most popular countertop options. Some engineered stone products can contain greater than 90% crystalline silica by mass with various polymer resins making up the remainder. Unfortunately, a large amount of dust can be produced during stone countertop manufacturing, fabrication, and installation, leading to overexposures to respirable crystalline silica (RCS) among the workers (NIOSH, 2016; Qi et al., 2017). In the U.S., the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) set the Permissible Exposure Limit (PEL) of 0.05 mg m⁻³ for RCS as an 8-hour time weighted average exposure (CFR, 2019).

Multiple clusters of silicosis related to RCS overexposures from working with engineered stone have been reported in recent years globally (Pascual et al., 2011; Kramer et al., 2012; Pérez-Alonso et al., 2014; Friedman et al., 2015; Hoy et al., 2018; Ronsmans et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2019). OSHA (OSHA, 2020) established a new National Emphasis Program in the U.S., specifically targeting workers' RCS overexposure in the countertop industry. With the resulting anticipated increase in field assessments of workers' RCS exposure, it is critical to ensure the accuracy of the analytical method for crystalline silica. X-ray diffraction (XRD) is widely used to quantify crystalline silica collected on polyvinyl chloride (PVC) filters to assess RCS exposures. The standard National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 2003) Method 7500 in the U.S. specifies three techniques to process the PVC filter after sample collection: muffle furnace ashing, radio frequency (RF) plasma ashing, or dissolution in tetrahydrofuran (THF). However, the OSHA Method ID-142 (2016), which was withdrawn since January 2020, only specifies the use of THF for sample preparation. Previous observation at NIOSH found that using THF to process samples containing polymer resins resulted in reactions between the resins and THF, which formed a paste-like residue on the redeposition apparatus, leading to artificially lower crystalline silica results. The plausible explanation is that the paste-like residue results in loss of silica particles during the redeposition process. It is not clear to us whether the residue may reduce the XRD signal from silica particles embedded inside even though they are redeposited. The presence of resins in engineered stone caused concern about the accuracy of RCS exposure measurements when THF is used to process the samples. This study aimed to demonstrate the effect THF posed on quantifying crystalline silica in samples from grinding a typical engineered stone.

Methods

Experimental Design

We designed an experiment to compare RCS analyses using both muffle furnace ashing and THF dissolution as sample preparation methods for multiple samples simultaneously

collected from grinding stone blocks in a laboratory testing system. We tested both a typical engineered stone product that contained 70–90% crystalline silica (as specified by its manufacturer) as well as a piece of granite. We hypothesized that there would be no significant difference between the two methods when RCS samples generated from granite, which does not contain resins, were analyzed, but significant differences might be observed between the two sample preparation methods when RCS samples from the engineered stone were analyzed. For each stone type, we conducted four sets of tests with different levels of respirable dust deposited on the samples, by varying the grinding times of one, two, four and eight minutes, to examine whether dust loading could affect the method comparison.

Laboratory Testing and Sampling

We conducted the experiment in a testing system similar to the one described in earlier publications (Qi et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2019). Supplementary Figure S1 is a diagram of the system and the sampling equipment. Different from the previous studies, a house ventilation system drove airflow through the test system by introducing particle-free air into the tool-testing chamber through a filter section that contained both pre- and HEPA filters. Stone blocks were mounted in the tool-testing chamber, which had two glove boxes on one side of the chamber which provided access for manually grinding the stone blocks using a handheld pneumatic grinder (GPW-216, Gison Machinery Co., Ltd., Taiwan) with a diamond grinding cup wheels (SIS-4SPCW-SC, Stone Industrial Supplies, Inc., Miami, FL, USA). The chamber connected to a 30-cm diameter duct, where representative air samples were taken. Multiple respirable dust samples were collected simultaneously from the dust cloud carried by the airflow through a sampling probe mounted on the duct (see Supplementary Figure S1). More details on the operation of the system and sampling are in the Supplementary Information.

Analysis of Crystalline Silica

All the bulk and respirable dust samples were sent to a laboratory of Bureau Veritas North America (BVNA, Novi, MI, USA), which is accredited by the American Industrial Hygiene Association Laboratory Accreditation Program, for analysis following relevant standard methods. The respirable dust samples were analyzed according to NIOSH Method 0600 (NIOSH 1998). Crystalline silica analysis for the samples was performed using XRD according to NIOSH Method 7500 (NIOSH 2003) including analyzing a bulk dust sample of each stone type first for an interference check. All the samples from the same stone type and grinding time were divided into two groups consistently, with one group using muffle furnace ashing preparation and the other group using THF dissolution preparation so that their results could be compared. See supplementary material for details of the analytical equipment and solutions. Three samples for each of the two methods were collected for analysis when grinding one, two, and four minutes; and six samples for each of the two methods were collected when grinding eight minutes. The paste-like residue was indeed observed for all the samples using THF but the amount was significantly greater for samples collected from the engineered stone compared to those from the granite. Extra THF was used to rinse the residue onto the silver membrane filter for subsequent XRD analysis.

Results and Discussions

We calculated the crystalline silica content (as a percentage by weight) for each sample by computing the ratio of the masses of crystalline silica and respirable or bulk dust. The bulk dust from the granite stone was 30% crystalline silica with quartz being the only crystalline silica polymorph detected. The bulk dust from the engineered stone was 60% crystalline silica with 14% being the quartz polymorph and 46% the cristobalite polymorph (see additional details in Supplementary Information). Figure 1 is a plot of the resulting crystalline silica content from the respirable dust samples of the two stone types using the two sample preparation methods.

The X-axis of Figure 1 reports the average masses of respirable dust from at least three samples for each data point, with the horizontal error bars representing one standard deviation of the respirable dust mass for the corresponding sample sets. For each stone type and preparation method, four data points are illustrated with different masses of respirable dust deposited due to different grinding times. Overall, the samples collected with the same grinding times of the same stone type had similar amounts of respirable dust (see additional details in Supplementary Information). The variations can mainly be attributed to the fact that samplers located at different positions in the flow splitting apparatus experienced different particle losses.

The Y-axis of Figure 1 reports the average crystalline silica content with the vertical error bars representing the combined standard uncertainties for each data point (see Supplementary Information on definition and derivation). For samples of dust produced while grinding the piece of granite, the two preparation methods resulted in similar crystalline silica content for all four levels of respirable dust loading. As hypothesized, statistical analysis of a t-test (one tailed and heteroscedastic) showed that the difference between the two methods for the granite dust samples was not significant ($P > 0.05$, see Table 1). For the engineered stone dust samples, the two methods had closer crystalline silica content for the two higher respirable dust loading levels, and their differences were not statistically significant (see Table 1); however, the crystalline silica content of samples from using THF dissolution was significantly lower ($P = 0.001$) than that of the counterpart samples from using muffle furnace ashing for the other two lower respirable dust loading levels. Specifically, for the samples from grinding one and two minutes of the engineered stone (which produced average respirable dust loading of about 0.19 and 0.34 mg, respectively), the crystalline silica content of the samples from using THF dissolution was 30.9% and 21.5% lower than that of the counterpart samples from using muffle furnace ashing, respectively. Note that the respirable dust samples from the engineered stone contained both quartz and cristobalite with a similar distribution among the two polymorphs as observed in the corresponding bulk dust sample. Figure S2 in the Supplementary Information presented the average quartz and cristobalite contents from the respirable dust samples of the engineered stone using the two sample preparation methods, which follow the same trend as the total crystalline silica content shown in Figure 1. Table 1 also lists the P values when comparing the quartz and cristobalite contents of the respirable dust samples of the engineered stone using the two sample preparation methods. The results are consistent with those from comparing the total crystalline silica content.

These results demonstrate that using THF dissolution to process RCS samples from engineered stone can lead to significantly lower quantification of crystalline silica content in the samples. The particle loss from the paste-like residue formed from the reactions between THF and the resins likely contributed the most to the lower quantification. As mentioned above, a significant amount of residue was formed when using THF dissolution to process the samples collected from grinding the engineered stone. Although extra THF was used to rinse and recover the residue, it is likely that the recovery was incomplete, especially if the residue formed thin layers on the apparatus and failed to be rinsed off. After the recovery effort for samples with different dust loading levels, it is possible that the remaining particle loss was from the residual failed to be rinsed off and was in similar amount. Therefore, the amount of lost particles would represent a smaller percentage of the dust loading on the samples with higher masses of respirable dust (> 0.5 mg), leading to negligible effects on the silica content results as shown in Figure 1. However, among samples with respirable dust masses less than 0.5 mg, the similar amount of particle loss represents a higher percentage of the dust loading and can lead to significantly lower quantification of crystalline silica.

Laboratories that are not aware of this issue may not perform the extra rinse and recovery procedures for the residue when using THF dissolution to prepare the samples, likely leading to even lower quantification of crystalline silica across all ranges of respirable dust loading on filter samples. Most full-shift samples from field surveys in this industry are expected to have respirable dust levels below 0.5 mg. As an example, assuming using a sampler with a flowrate of 2.5 L min^{-1} to collect 480 minutes of air that has an RCS concentration of 0.05 mg m^{-3} (OSHA PEL) and a 60% silica content (similar to the levels reported in Figure 1), the calculated respirable dust on the filter is 0.1 mg. Therefore, most field assessment on workers' RCS exposure in the stone countertop industry could be affected by using THF to process samples for XRD analysis.

Note that the variations of crystalline silica content are larger in the engineered stone than in the granite, which is likely due to the heterogeneous distribution of crystalline silica in the engineered stone. There appears to be a small trend on silica content among different dust loading levels from the two methods for the engineered stone. However, the small trend is more likely due to the heterogeneous distribution of crystalline silica in the engineered stone as well, especially considering that the four data points with their vertical error bars, representing combined standard uncertainty, are well overlapped. Using an engineered stone with more homogeneous silica distribution, if available, and/or increasing the sample size (both dust loading levels and samples at each dust loading level) may lead to more conclusive results on this observation, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusions

When conducting assessments on workers' RCS exposures in the stone countertop industry, extreme caution should be exercised when using THF for sample preparation which may lead to significantly lower quantification of the RCS in the air samples. Although the RF plasma ashing method was not investigated in this study, it does not react with resins, thus, it would be expected to work similarly to muffle furnace. Either muffle furnace or RF plasma ashing should be specified as the preferred processing method when engineered stone is

expected to present in the sampling location to produce more accurate quantification of crystalline silica.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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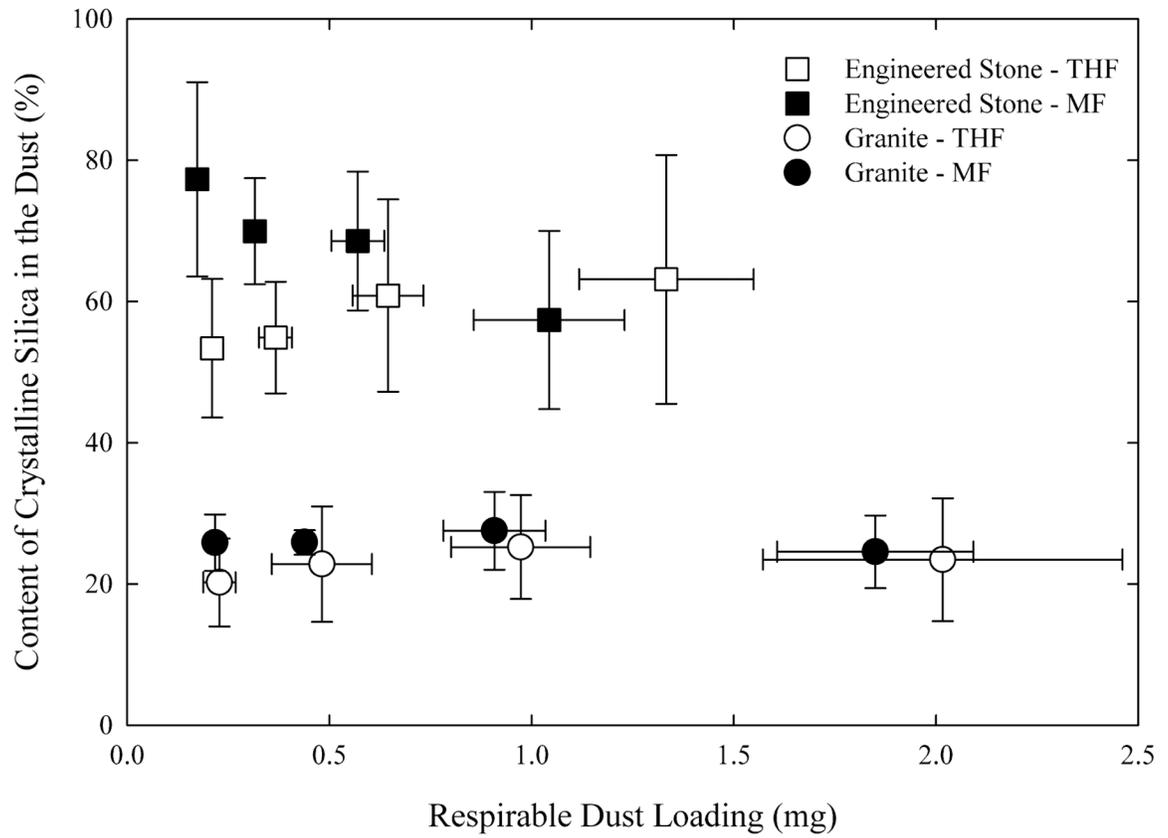


Figure 1. Content of Crystalline Silica in the Respirable Dust Collected from Grinding Engineered Stone or Granite. The samples were prepared using either tetrahydrofuran (THF) or muffle furnace (MF).

Table 1.

Statistical Analyses of the Comparison of the Crystalline Silica Content between Samples Prepared by using Muffle Furnace and Tetrahydrofuran (THF): *P* value for each comparison

	Grinding time 1 minute	Grinding time 2 minutes	Grinding time 4 minutes	Grinding time 8 minutes
Engineered Stone (crystalline silica)	0.001	0.001	0.09	0.11
Engineered Stone (quartz)	0.002	< 0.001	0.03	0.48
Engineered Stone (cristobalite)	< 0.001	0.002	0.14	0.12
Granite (crystalline silica)	0.05	0.08	0.05	0.18

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