

Illness Among WTC Bravest

By William Murphy
and Dan Janison

STAFF WRITERS

About one-half of the Fire Department personnel who worked at the World Trade Center have undergone complete physical exams and about 1,600 have respiratory problems, officials said Friday.

The problems range from mild coughs to severe ailments that could force about 100 firefighters or more into disability retirement, Fire Department spokesman Frank Gribbon said.

The firefighters union estimates from 400 to 500 firefighters might be forced to retire for medical reasons, according to Tom Butler, a spokesman for the Uniformed Firefighters Association.

Gribbon said department doctors put the number at 100, "maybe up to 200," based on the results of the four-hour physical examinations.

The rate of medical leave is about 8 percent, Gribbon said, "slightly above normal." The rate was as high as 10 percent in the early 1990s.

The Fire Department said it thinks it has identified the most serious medical cases among its 11,000 firefighters and 2,000 emergency medical technicians and paramedics.

About half, or 6,500, have undergone exams that include psychological screening, according to Gribbon. He said the other 6,500 would be tested by the end of January.

He said there was a presumption that all uniformed members of the department were at Ground Zero at some point during or after Sept. 11, so all were being examined. Some worked

there only briefly, he said, while others worked there for weeks.

Gribbon said problems reported by firefighters could not be linked medically to exposure at the site — though some surely were — and that some firefighters might have had respiratory problems before Sept. 11.

"Given the mushroom cloud and the particulate matter in the air that day, it was impossible to be there and not be forced to breathe some of that material. You couldn't see if you were trapped in that," Gribbon said.

"Some people have suffered severe respiratory illness," he said, but it was impossible to pinpoint the level of exposure.

Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen said he did not think any health problems would lead to increased retirement immediately because the firefighters would wait to see whether long-term problems develop.

"I think, generally, people who are planning to retire have not started the process yet . . . we've seen a slight increase over the course of the whole year . . ." the commissioner said. "People who have something — an injury, a lung problem — won't have resolved that yet."

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emitted by burning fuel and some types of plastics and can cause leukemia. As recently as mid-December, EPA monitoring equipment at the disaster site measured benzene levels 400 times as high as the agency's safety standard for continuous exposure over one year. The chemical dissipates quickly, the EPA says, but the agency has cautioned cleanup workers to wear respirators.

Drs. Alarie and Dalton both say the majority of people exposed to low levels of environmental irritants, including VOCs, eventually become acclimated to them, and symptoms recede.

Still, the EPA's Ms. Callahan says the agency has decided to start measuring again soon for the compounds in the blocks around ground zero. The agency also is expanding testing for some other compounds. It will soon be looking at formaldehyde, a powerful irritant and possible carcinogen that can be produced by the burning of numerous materials, including furniture and carpets.

Beyond VOCs, the gases and particles floating around lower Manhattan may have combined in another way to cause respiratory irritation, some scientists say. Sulfur dioxide, a common air pollutant that comes from burning fuel, normally is mostly filtered out by the nasal passages. But in the post-Sept. 11 air, sulfur dioxide from the combustion of jet fuel and the diesel burned by cleanup vehicles may have attached to particles of other matter that move deeper into the throat or lungs, according to NYU's Dr. Thurston.

immune systems, making them more vulnerable to pollutants. They wouldn't ordinarily affect

More broadly, some people are genetically predisposed to irritability by airborne substances, helping explain why they may be suffering from asthma while others aren't, scientists say. M. Brooks, an asthma specialist at the University of South Florida, says prior studies show between 10% and 20% of the population has what he calls "hyper-responsiveness." That means that cells in the respiratory breathing passages are more sensitive to environmental irritants. "Most people don't know they have allergies," he says.

Dr. Brooks says his research has shown that environmental irritants can trigger asthma in this region, and he theorizes that the situation near ground zero. If treated with steroids and other drugs, these people will return to a more secure health condition.

Yet to some area residents, the dust provides little reassurance. "There's no way you can implode a building of office space and not have dust," says Donna Lueker, who lives in the blocks south of the World Trade Center. The weeks after the collapse, her husband ventured back to the site to retrieve belongings and suffered from sinus infections and sore throat.

The couple, in their 40s, have a two-year-old boy who lives in the East River to Brooklyn. "I don't want to breathe that dust from now, I don't want it in my lung," Ms. Lueker says.

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