



We were naive, says Wendy Tabb with husband George and their pet Yorkie, Scooter, during a recent check of the air cleaner in their Tribeca apartment.

Danger in the Dust

Angry, ailing and afraid, Ground Zero residents demand to know: Is their air safe?

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, George and Wendy Tabb looked on in horror as the World Trade Center, just six blocks from their 16th-floor apartment in lower Manhattan, collapsed. The ghastly image through their living room window, and the sickening sound—"like steel potato chips crackling," Wendy recalls—still haunt them. But George, 40, a free-

lance writer and musician, and Wendy, 38, a jewelry designer, also have more tangible reminders of the terror attack: nagging coughs, sudden nosebleeds and what Wendy describes as "headaches like I've never had."

The Tabbs are two of the hundreds of thousands who were exposed to choking dust when 1.6 million tons of debris rained on lower Manhattan.

As the towers fell, the panicked couple fled their flat with only damp washcloths to protect their faces. And like many others, they ventured home only after EPA head Christie Whitman announced on Sept. 21 that it was safe to do so.

But since then, hundreds of reported cases of sinusitis, sore throats, chronic bronchitis and sudden-onset asthma

PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVAN KAFKA

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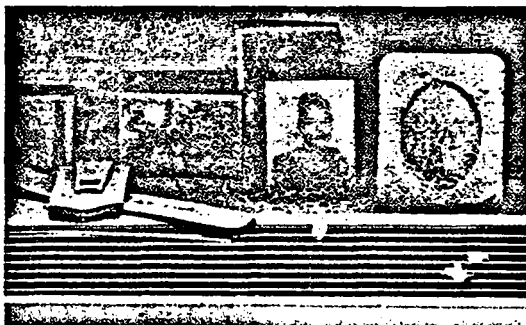
● controversy

have prompted health professionals to second-guess the government directive and question whether those who were exposed may be at increased long-term risk for lung cancer and asbestosis, which can take 15 to 20 years to develop. "We're seeing something involving many more individuals than has occurred in this country before," says Stephen M.

Levin, M.D., codirector of an independent, federally and privately funded \$13 million study charged with monitoring the health of 8,500 Ground Zero workers and volunteers. "It's an entirely new phenomenon."

To date, various programs have treated more than 600 on-site rescue workers for respiratory problems and screened 400 other day laborers, mostly Hispanic immigrants who were brought in without respirators to clean contaminated buildings. Moreover, as many as 500 New York City firefighters may resign by year's end due to failing health.

For its part, the EPA stands by its



Four days after 9/11 fine dust coated the family photographs in Sheila Rossi's Battery Park City apartment.

air-sampling procedures, insisting that it responded properly to the disaster by testing for the most immediate threats: asbestos and volatile chemicals that result from the combustion of jet fuel. "We didn't find levels of concern in the general neighborhood [of Ground Zero]," says spokeswoman Mary Mears. "Clearly, the dust had an impact, but that doesn't mean it's toxic."

But according to another key air-quality study conducted by a team of researchers from the University of California at Davis, the EPA's measures fell short of the bar. The California scientists detected such toxins as sulfur and nickel a full mile from Ground

Zero. They also found 100 times more fine particulates—lead from burning electrical systems, pulverized concrete and glass from insulation and windows—than the EPA's tests, and in concentrations even higher than those seen during the Kuwaiti oil-field fires of 1991. "The EPA used ordinary methods for an extraordinary event," says Thomas Cahill, a professor of atmospheric sciences who led the study. "They weren't thorough enough to gauge what was actually in the air."

When the Tabbs returned to clean their apartment in late September, they discovered "what looked like the first snowfall," George says of the half-inch layer of dust that had found its way in through closed windows and the building's ventilation system. Almost immediately, "our eyes were itchy and watery. We got full-body hives and bloody noses. And this was happening to everyone in our building."

And many beyond it. A neighbor, trial attorney Sheila Rossi, walked for blocks through thick smoke and dust after being evacuated from her apartment a block from Tower 1, returned a week later and spent days cleaning her apartment while wearing only a paper face mask. Eventually she suffered severe nosebleeds almost daily. While even her doctor is unsure of their cause, Rossi, who still has them occasionally, blames pollutants in the air. "Never in my life had I had one before," she says.

In response to the public outcry, the EPA has begun testing indoor air and cleaning local buildings; meanwhile the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has received \$20 million to track long-term health problems in the area. But those steps won't come soon enough for the Tabbs, who, after staying in their apartment only briefly, are once again bunking with relatives. "I feel betrayed by all the agencies that were supposed to protect my health," says Wendy, "but I'm not even sure who to blame."

- Susan Schindehette
- Diane Herbst in New York City



"My apartment was ruined," says Rossi (in her lobby with a mural of the Twin Towers).