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In N.Y., Taking a Breath of Fear

Illnesses Bring New Doubts About Toxic Exposure Near Ground Zero

By Christine Haughney

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, January 8, 2002; Page A01

NEW YORK -- There was something about the air. For a while after Sept. 11, George Tabb and his wife tried to stick it out in their apartment just north of the World Trade Center, tried to ignore his twice-nightly asthma attacks and her pounding headaches.

Eventually, they moved in with Tabb's stepfather. But Tabb still goes home to pick up his mail, and within 20 minutes the metallic taste returns to his mouth, and the wheezing.

"All of a sudden, boom, I've got a nosebleed, the asthma, a headache," he said.

Recently Tabb received evidence that the air in his apartment may be as dangerous as he suspects. Independent tests -- results of which are disputed by the city -- found that dust taken from an air vent in his apartment building's hallway contained 555 times the suggested acceptable level for asbestos. Samples from a bathroom vent show dangerous levels of fiberglass.



George Tabb holds his dog Scooter in his contaminated apartment in lower Manhattan. (Helayna Seidman - For The Post)

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"No one knows what was burning down there" at ground zero, he said. "I am concerned that in five years or 10 years, I'm going to be part of a cancer cluster."

Nearly four months after the World Trade Center attacks, the fires there are largely extinguished. But fears of the toxic brew left behind in lower Manhattan's air remain -- as do concerns that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other government agencies did not warn residents sufficiently or soon enough of the dangers.

Many of those who live or work downtown report strikingly similar symptoms: nosebleeds, sore throats, bronchial infections and an endless racking cough.

"People's airways are narrowing down," said Dr. Stephen Levin, medical director of the nationally renowned Mount Sinai I.J. Selikoff Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine. "We have cases of new onset reactive airway disease for people who were in excellent physical condition prior to September 11th."

About one-fourth of the city's firefighters have complained of severe coughing after working at ground zero, and more than a thousand have filed notices of claims against the city. Last week four Port Authority police officers were reassigned from the site after they tested positive for elevated mercury levels in their blood.

Dozens of students at nearby Stuyvesant High School have complained of rashes, nosebleeds, headaches and respiratory infections. Three teachers have left because of respiratory problems.

"I'm really concerned," said Marilena Christadoulou, head of the school's Parents' Association. "It's a concern that comes from the whole unprecedented and unknown nature of what is down at ground zero."

The EPA, which has conducted thousands of tests of Lower Manhattan's air since Sept. 11, has repeatedly assured residents that the air is safe to breathe. Doctors note that some symptoms could be caused or enhanced by stress -- and many will undoubtedly dissipate as the last smoldering fires go out and the air grows clearer.

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But Levin and others fear the unpredictable effects of the combination of many dangerous substances released into the downtown air could lead to significant long-term health problems.

"Nobody knows," said Regina Santella, a professor at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University and director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences' Center for Environmental Health in Northern Manhattan. "We know what the monitoring data tells us and we know the symptoms of what people have. It's just hard to reconcile the two pieces of information."

EPA's Role Questioned

In the weeks after the World Trade Center towers fell, tens of thousands of New Yorkers tried to decide whether it was safe to move back into apartments and businesses near the site of the attacks. The EPA played a leading role in calming those fears.

"I am glad to reassure the people of New York . . . that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink," EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman said a week after the attacks. "The good news for the residents of New York is that the air, while smoky, is not dangerous," an EPA spokeswoman told the Los Angeles Times at about the same time. And at the end of September, another spokeswoman, citing recent tests for asbestos, told the New York Daily News: "There was not a significant risk, even in the early days."

The agency released selected test results that seemed to buttress those assertions.

But the EPA also found more troubling results, and it did not release that data until after the nonprofit New York Environmental Law and Justice Project filed a Freedom of Information Act request. These tests found elevated levels of dioxin, PCBs, lead and chromium, all toxic substances, in the air, soil and water around the site.

In a Sept. 26 EPA test, for example, three of 10 samples near the attack site showed elevated readings for lead. Exposure to lead can damage the kidneys and central nervous system, and is especially dangerous to children. An Oct. 11 EPA test in the ground zero area found benzene, a colorless liquid that evaporates quickly but can cause leukemia in long-term exposure, measured 58 times above the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's limit.

Those results were not released until late October.

EPA spokeswoman Bonnie Bellow said the late release was an oversight, caused by the chaos of those first weeks. She added that the agency had performed 3,561 tests for asbestos in New York, and only 29 of those

recorded higher levels than the federal standard.

But Joel Kupferman, the environmental law project's executive director, is not convinced.

"They've created this false climate that things are safe," he said. "They're trying to insinuate that since September 11th, the problem is gone and it's going to get better."

Alerted to concerns about Tabb's building, he said, the project hired an independent industrial hygienist to conduct tests of surfaces there on Dec. 3, using methods published by the American Society for Testing and Materials. The tests found the presence of settled asbestos dust 555 times above the suggested acceptable level.

Asked about those results, spokesman Geoff Ryan of the city's Department of Environmental Protection said the department does not recognize this type of test, and that its own tests at the building, done on Dec. 12, had come back negative.

Scientists with HP Environmental Inc. of Reston, Va., warn that the asbestos dust in Lower Manhattan is so finely pulverized that the EPA's more conventional tests may not pick it up. The company tested the air for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey following the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and it returned after Sept. 11 to test for dangerous levels of asbestos.

Their first tests on Sept. 21 and 22 found that the air was safe.

But follow-up tests, aimed at detecting finer particulate matter, recorded much higher levels of contamination. Now they suspect that asbestos is embedded in the walls and carpeting of nearby buildings, according to the study team's leader, Hugh Granger.

EPA officials offer conflicting advice at this point. They say the apartments and office towers around ground zero are safe -- but they advise landlords to seek professional asbestos cleaners. And they've advised all workers on the site to wear respirators.

"There is nothing we have found that is at a significant level," said Bellow of the EPA, "that would say you should not come here to live or work."

Some environmental experts say that the EPA, at the very least, failed to promptly communicate test results to the public. The agency was too quick, they said, to interpret a few test results as a clean bill of health.

"The public did not receive the information it needed in a prompt fashion," said Eric Goldstein of the Natural Resources Defense Council, who is working on an environmental assessment of the World Trade Center area. Asked about the EPA's early assurances that the air was

safe, he said: "A week after this event it would have been very hard to make conclusive statements about air quality in either direction."

Kathryn Freed, a City Council member until her term ended Dec. 31, is still worried. She lives a few blocks from the World Trade Center site and has suffered from bronchitis and nosebleeds.

"They should be measuring us. They should be monitoring us," she said. "There's like a disconnect between what's actually happening here and what they're saying."

Problems at a Nearby School

Stuyvesant High School, one of the city's most prestigious public schools, reopened to students on Oct. 9. Five blocks north of the World Trade Center site, it is next to the pier where rubble from ground zero is loaded onto barges to be taken to the Staten Island landfill.

From the start students and teachers complained of eye and respiratory problems. When the Department of Health announced that students could report their illnesses for a study, teenagers waited in line for more than an hour outside the nurse's office.

Sophomore Georgia Faust said her eyes became infected, "watering so much it would feel like you're peeling onions." Several students needed inhalers to rid themselves of sinus infections.

The city's Board of Education insists the site is safe, and that its air quality is monitored each day. And special floor mats have been installed at the entryways to prevent students from tracking in dust.

"There's something in the air and that's dust," said spokeswoman Catie Marshall. "But it's not the kind of thing that's going to have a long-term effect."

When Brooklyn firefighter Palmer Doyle arrived at the World Trade Center after the second tower collapsed, there was one respirator for 47 firefighters. He worked almost a month of 12-hour shifts wearing a flimsy paper mask. Later in October, his hoarseness, bronchitis and a hacking cough kept him off the job for 16 days.

"Guys are a little scared. They're nervous," he said. "We know what environment we worked in and it wasn't healthy."

The Uniformed Firefighters Association estimates that about one-third of its 9,000 members suffer from the "World Trade Center cough." Tom Manley has it too; he's a union chief who spent countless hours at ground zero consoling relatives and digging for victims. He carries an inhaler and cough medicine. "You wake up in the morning with a heavy cough,

which I've never had before," he said. "You can't breathe."

David Prezant, a doctor who has spent 15 years with the New York Fire Department, says he is more concerned about chemicals than dust: "There is treatment for particulate matter exposure," he said. "There is no treatment for PCBs."

Apartment Ills

Tribeca and Battery Park City are two of this city's newest residential neighborhoods, the former constructed out of old industrial lofts, the latter on landfill. Thousands of young families flocked here. Now the area's proximity to ground zero has many talking about getting out. Who wants their children exposed to the air and dust?

George Tabb and his wife say their symptoms disappear within 48 hours of leaving their Tribeca apartment. But the landlord refuses to tear up their lease. Tabb's insurance company won't pay to clean his apartment of dust and asbestos until his landlord cleans up the building's ventilation system. Management started a cleanup last month, but not an asbestos abatement.

The Tabbs had planned to start a family. The city Health Department recently stated that the air is safe for pregnant women. But the Tabbs aren't buying that.

"We're going to have kids," he said, "and I don't know what's going to happen."

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