

DRAFT

TO: All DOH Employees

FROM: Neal L. Cohen, M.D.
Commissioner

DATE: October 9, 2001

SUBJECT: Health and Safety Issues for Returning to DOH Buildings in the
Downtown Area

Beginning the week of September 24, Department of Health employees were asked to return to work in downtown buildings that had been evacuated following the World Trade Center disaster on September 11, 2001. I would like to inform you of the steps which have been taken to ensure the health and safety for employees returning to work in the downtown area.

The City has required that buildings located in the secured areas following September 11 be subject to a comprehensive inspection. This inspection included: assessment of building stability; safe functioning of building utilities (e.g. gas, water, steam and electric, heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems); and clean-up of interior dust and debris, followed by testing for hazardous materials such as asbestos.

Based on the results of these inspections, it was determined that all downtown DOH buildings (including both City-owned and leased) were found to be safe for re-occupancy and the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) worked with the DOH to coordinate clean-up efforts. Currently, the DOH Bureau of Operations is in the process of replacing filters on window air conditioning units in buildings that do not have centralized heating and air conditioning systems. Window air conditioners should not be turned on until the filters have been changed. Centralized heating and air conditioning systems (HVAC) filters are also being vacuumed before being turned on. It is also recommended that windows be kept closed if visible smoke or dust is near the building.

From a health perspective, the substances of concern that may have been released into the air include asbestos and fine airborne particles. Therefore, tests to date have focused primarily on assessing these substances.

Concerns have been expressed regarding the potential for asbestos to be

present in DOH and other City buildings. In workplaces where levels of asbestos exposure are high and exposures persist for many years, health concerns include lung diseases such as asbestosis and cancer. However, when exposures are low and of short duration, the risk of developing an asbestos-related illness such as asbestosis or cancer is extremely low. To assess these levels, sampling for asbestos was conducted in all the downtown DOH buildings. Results of sampling contained either no detectable asbestos fibers or were well-below the most stringent criteria used for testing indoor air in homes and schools (0.01 fibers per cubic centimeter air). With regards to outdoor air, daily samples are being analyzed for asbestos, and results indicate that, as expected, asbestos is present in some of the debris at the site and in areas very close to the site. However, most air sampling results near the World Trade Center were below the community and residential indoor air standards.

Following the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, significant quantities of smoke and dust were released in the air. In the days following, smoke conditions have varied depending on weather conditions. However, as many of you know, the smell of smoke is still present on some days and smoke can cause throat and eye irritation. Symptoms should diminish once exposure ceases. A limited number of disposable masks that filter out particulates in the air are available for those employees who are finding the smoke conditions to be especially uncomfortable.

Air particulate monitors have been collecting continuous samples at eleven routine sites in New York City. The highest daily average for small air-borne particulates so far has been 42.1 micrograms per cubic meter (ug/m³), which does not exceed the federal Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) standard of 65 ug/m³. Beginning September 11 at 1:00 pm, the EPA's daily average standard for particulate matter (PM) smaller than 2.5 microns (PM 2.5) has not been exceeded at any of these 11 sites. On most days since September 11, PM 2.5 levels at each of the monitoring sites have been similar to those measured earlier in September.

If you should any further questions, please contact the Employee Safety and Health Unit within the Office of Operations located at 125 Worth Street, Room 1012.