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5M pledged to clear air

Feds funding WTC pollution tests

By JOE MAHONEY and BILL HUTCHINSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

Federal officials promised $5 million to the city and state yesterday to examine homes and schools near Ground Zero for pollutants and to monitor potential health problems caused by the collapse of the twin towers.

The money, which will come in a grant from the the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also will be used to assess the health of rescue and construction workers who have labored at the World Trade Center site since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Officials worry that the number of asthma cases and other respiratory problems will rise.

"We must make sure asthma patients are cared for properly in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack," federal Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said.

State Health Department officials said they will closely watch hospital emergency rooms to see whether there is a spike in asthma cases.

"Simply the stress that resulted from this terrible tragedy could contribute to increased incidence of asthma," said Health Department spokeswoman Kris Smith.

Gov. Pataki said the state will launch a public awareness campaign about the dangers of asthma.

While state and local health officials have deemed air quality around the Trade Center site safe, a private environmental firm has found alarming levels of cancer-causing asbestos in the air.

Officials at HP Environmental Inc. said seven of 11 air samples they took in buildings three blocks from Ground Zero contained asbestos levels above federal standards.

Deputy Mayor Joe Lohta said the federal Environmental Protection Agency was looking into the HP report.

EPA standards call for asbestos decontamination procedures when levels reach 70 fibers per square millimeter. HP officials said three of their samples contained more than 300 fibers per square millimeter.

"The EPA is looking into this study that was done by an outside group," Lohta said. "We're going by the federal EPA standards right now, and EPA is also doing their own testing and they're not finding the same results as this independent study."

Asbestos was used in 1 World Trade Center up to the 40th floor. The substance was banned in 1971 as the Trade Center was being built.

The EPA also has said the levels of dioxin in water samples from the 13th St. pump station were not elevated.

Water samples from the Hudson River and the East River contained amounts of PCBs and asbestos that were "below the level of concern," officials said.

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