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N.Y. can breathe free

Health experts say air quality's OK after World Trade Center disaster

By BARBARA HOFFMAN

ONE of the big health concerns in the aftermath of last Tuesday's destruction of the World Trade Center was the damage all that dust and smoke could do to people's lungs.

As the Twin Towers collapsed and sent a wave of soot cascading through downtown, victims were left covered in dense, powdery ash. Many needed to be treated for smoke inhalation.

Experts feared serious air-quality problems, but they now say the general public can breathe easy — there is little threat of any lingering health hazards.

"We anticipated a big problem," said Dr. Gillian Shepherd, an allergy-immunology specialist at Weill Cornell Medical Center-New York Presbyterian Hospital. "But thank heavens, it didn't happen."

Of top concern was asbestos, a synthetic insulation that is now banned but may have been used in the construction of the World Trade Center in the 1970s. Officials worried that residents would inhale large quantity of airborne particles of asbestos, which can cause cancer and other maladies.

But the city's Board of Health said its readings showed there was very little asbestos in the air.

Besides, said Dr. Murray Rogers, chief of pulmonology at Lenox Hill Hospital, "with asbestos, you need a lot of exposure over a long period of time before you suffer any adverse effect. This didn't happen. The area was evacuated and those large particles fell to the ground. Then the rain washed the air."

Rogers said a bigger threat was posed by hot fumes that may have harmed victims' lungs and tracheae.

"Certainly, older people, people with chronic lung disease and young children [who have immature lungs] were more susceptible on Tuesday to whatever particulates were in the air. But the danger now has passed."

Still, many people were left choking and gasping for air. The best remedy, said the experts, is to drink lots of water.

"Eight glasses a day," recommended Rogers. "Lungs are supposed to be soft, supple and moist, and hydrating yourself will keep them from getting dry."

Of course, those aiding in the rescue effort need to take every precaution to protect themselves, Rogers said.

That includes wearing masks at all times and changing them when necessary, since filters are effective only so long.

Rescuers working at the site should launder their clothing well to keep from spreading the

Rogers said people who are more susceptible to pollution in general — those who have emphysema or asthma — may want to see their doctors if they're feeling ill or are coughing more than usual.

In some cases, he said, people may be suffering psychosomatic symptoms triggered by Tuesday's trauma. But he added, "Don't readily discount any coughing or anything else as psychosomatic. If you're feeling ill, see a doctor, if only to set your mind at ease."

If people seem to be sneezing and coughing more this week, it has less to do with the World Trade Towers disaster and more to do with the time of the year, said Shepherd.

"I was just looking at today's pollen counts," she said yesterday, "and they're more than 5,000 per cubic meter of air [a

distance of about 3 feet. There are usually only a few hundred grains of pollen, and any of it, landing on the nose, will induce an allergic reaction."

Dust from downtown may irritate sensitive respiratory systems further, but the key triggers are mold spores and weed pollens, said Shepherd, who's been fielding panicked calls from asthma and allergy patients for the last week.

"Though we don't have information about every detail about the composition of the smoke and dust cloud [that enveloped lower Manhattan], every indication we've had so far from city officials have been very reassuring."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services confirmed that the health risk from the smoking remains of the towers poses little risk to the general public; nor is there a risk, the agency added, from the decomposing remains under the rubble.

For more information about dust, debris and asbestos, visit the HHS Web site at www.hhs.gov.

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