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Seeking Answers About Air Quality

In the aftermath, uncertainty lingers

By Margaret Ramirez
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Hundreds of people who live and work in lower Manhattan crowded into Pace University last night with one question about their air.

Is it safe?

Many came wearing surgical masks, demanding specific details about the types and amounts of toxins in their breathing air, specifically lead and asbestos. A panel of experts provided reassurances on the question of asbestos levels, but opened a cauldron of other worries about other dangerous particles.

Dr. Stephen Levin, director of occupational safety and health at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, told the crowd that the level of asbestos was low enough to pose no significant health risk.

"We don't know all the facts," Levin said. "We do know that the further you are from the site, the less risk you have. No one at this point can give you absolute reassurance that there is no risk."

Carl Friedberg, who has lived in lower Manhattan since 1979, said he and his 10-year-old son, Sam, have been coughing and wheezing almost every night. But Friedberg said the panelists at the meeting made him feel better about the air quality.

"I felt reassured as a resident, that even though there are health effects, I'm not going to die," he said. "I might lose two or three years off my life, but that's OK with me."

The most serious concerns are related to fiberglass, dioxins and PCBs in the air.

The New York Environmental Law and Justice Project distributed an informational flier saying an independent analysis of dust samples from the area found three of four contained fiberglass at levels between 10 percent and 15 percent. The International Agency for Research and Cancer lists some of those glass fibers as carcinogenic to humans.

The group's findings also noted that the fires still burning at the World Trade Center are sources of highly toxic combustion products, including dioxins, PCBs, furans and other cancer-causing substances.

The flier suggested that the Environmental Protection Agency was not providing complete information. "Health officials may think they are doing people a favor by withholding information," it read, "but there is no reason to assume that New Yorkers will not be just as courageous in dealing with air quality issues as they have been in dealing with the disaster."

One resident of Southbridge Towers, a housing development on Beekman Place, said he was left with questions. "All I know right now is there are irritants. What are these things?" said the man, who asked not to be identified. "For some people, that meeting might have been soothing, but I'm still thirsting for more information."

Staff writer Bobby Cuza contributed to this story.

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