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Buried bodies aren't public-health risk: doc

By KIRSTEN DANIS

Health experts say that even though bodies could be trapped under the World Trade Center rubble for weeks, the grim prospect does not pose a public health threat.

"To a large extent, they are entombed, much like in a graveyard," said Dr. Gilbert Burnham, director of The Center for International Emergency Disaster and Refugee Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

As the dark reality of Tuesday's attack continued to sink in yesterday, concerns rose about the health impact of the crash site. But experts said there is little to fear.

Bodies spread diseases such as cholera or dysentery only if they were already harboring them, Burnham said.

And there's little chance of that, he added.

After a 1999 earthquake killed more than 18,000 people in Turkey, there was no outbreak of disease or contamination.

The chlorine in New York's water would kill any bacteria and most viruses that managed to penetrate the system, Burnham said.

Still, a newly arrived team of 35 epidemic specialists from the federal Centers for Disease Control were stationed at hospitals yesterday to help the city keep a close eye on the health effects of the terror attack.

"We haven't seen anything unusual — other than horror of the collision," said city Health Department spokeswoman Sandra Mullins.

The irritating dust in the air could be the toughest problem, although the rain helped temper it, said Dr. Jacqueline Moline of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Only those at the attack site should worry about asbestos exposure, Moline said.

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