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Downtown N.Y. Air Called Safe Even With Dust, Deaths

Health Experts Say Asbestos Levels Acceptable, Bodies Unlikely to Infect

By David Brown
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Neither the dust generated by the collapse of the World Trade Center towers nor the bodies buried in the rubble pose a risk to public health, several experts said yesterday.

Although the dust contains asbestos, the airborne concentrations are within permissible levels in places to which the public has access. In addition, the asbestos being found is the least hazardous of the four types of the fiber.

Decaying human remains do not in themselves produce disease. A few specific infections can be transmitted from the bodies of people who were infected at the time of death to people who have physical contact with infected fluids or organs. Even those cases, however, are extremely rare.

"It's a very unpleasant situation, but we find ourselves having to deal with these situations all the time," said William D. Haglund, a forensic anthropologist who worked in the Seattle medical examiner's office for 16 years. "What is uncommon here is the quantity [of bodies] and the awareness of the public of what you're dealing with."

As of last night, 5,422 people remained unaccounted for in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on Sept. 11. Cleanup of the site in Lower Manhattan may take months.

The neighborhood around the World Trade Center was covered in a layer of gray dust after the buildings collapsed. The material is both gritty and fluffy, resembling a coarse version of the type of insulation that is blown into attics and crawl spaces. Its particles are the residue of masonry, ceiling tiles, carpet fibers, insulation, fire retardants and many other substances.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sampled the material two days after the collapse. As of midday yesterday, the EPA had taken 83 samples. In 20 of them, more than 1 percent of the material was asbestos.

Dusts that contain less than 1 percent asbestos are not considered hazardous. Those over 1 percent require special handling. The high-level dust is being disposed of in a special area of the Staten Island landfill, where the rubble is being taken, said James Daloia, the leader of one of the EPA emergency response teams in New York.

One reason for the differing concentrations of asbestos in various dust samples may lie in the towers' construction. Tower 1 contained asbestos up to the 40th floor; Tower 2 contained no asbestos, Daloia said.

The more critical issue is the airborne concentration of the fiber, said John L. Henshaw, head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In both the public zone and the area between the public access boundary and rubble pile itself, airborne asbestos concentrations have been uniformly below levels at which the EPA requires action to reduce them, he said.

When the airborne concentration averages 0.1 fiber per cubic centimeter of air for an eight-hour period, or 1 fiber per cubic centimeter for 30 minutes, workers must wear respirators. In the blocks around the rubble pile, the fiber concentration has been between 0.0013 and 0.009 fibers per cubic centimeter, said Gil Gillen, an OSHA assistant regional administrator. In the financial district where the public is now allowed, the asbestos levels are lower or undetectable.

However, OSHA is recommending that workers on the rubble pile wear half-face respirators, because the concentration may be higher there. The asbestos found has all been chrysotile, the type least strongly associated with cancer.

Unburied bodies are "not nearly the hazard that people assume," said Victor W. Weedn, a pathologist and former military medical examiner. However, there have been cases in which specific diseases, notably tuberculosis, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and hepatitis B, have been transmitted to people performing autopsies.

The bigger risk faced by rescue workers and excavators will come from the innumerable sharp and heavy objects piled precariously in the wreckage, and from the emotional effects of finding corpses.

"The health risks are psychological, although that can be managed quite well while the work is going on," said Haglund, who has led projects opening mass graves in Rwanda, Bosnia and Croatia for the organization Physicians for Human Rights.

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