NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

DAILY NEWS, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2001

Flying debris of the towers can cause health problems

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Airborne human bone ash, concrete dust, asbestos and fiberglass particles near Ground Zero pose a threat to unprotected recovery workers and could cause "irritation" to those with chronic lung problems or asthma, an environmental medicine expert said.

But for healthy New Yorkers, not exposed to the air for prolonged periods of time, the risk factor is minimal.

"Concentration falls off rapidly with distance," and New Yorkers off site are probably at "very little risk," said Mount Sinai Medical Center's Dr. Stephen Levin, medical director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

But those with lung or asthma conditions should stay away and not breathe the dust, to avoid irritation, Levin said.

Apartment dwellers returning to dust-filled homes should contact professional cleaners. Homeowners should not clean the dust off themselves using brooms, dust cloths, or household vacuum cleaners.

"Do not disturb it and put it in the air again," Levin said.

And all rescue workers should wear respirator masks because they screen out asbestos fiber. "The hospital masks are inadequate," Levin said.

Rescue workers should also wash before eating, change as they leave the scene, bag their shoes and clothing and wash it separately from family laundry, Levin said.

ASBESTOS

What it can do: With long exposure, scar lung tissue, cause cancer. Two days or two weeks is not enough to cause scarring, Levin said. Any exposure raises concern about cancer.

Safe levels: None. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 70 fibers per square millimeter of air for an extended period is a "level of concern." In bulk dust, 1% in a sample is hazardous. Many EPA readings near the ruins show levels well below 70. At the northeast corner of South End Ave. and Albany St., the level was 103.7 on Sunday, 29.6 on Monday.

Even low levels in settled dust can, if stirred into the air, surpass relatively safe levels for air, said Dr. Barry Commoner, senior scientist at Queens College Center for the Biology of Natural Sciences

FIBERGLASS

What it can do: Irritate skin and the tissue in eyes, nose, throat and lungs. Some fear that newer, finer fibers, as small as asbestos, may also cause cancer. But Levin said fibers used in the World Trade Center were probably different: "They were fatter, don't behave the same in the body and are dissolved more readily."

Safe levels: There are no official standards, said Commoner.

BONE

There are no safety standards for bone ash and it probably poses no health risk.

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