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Hosp ERs swamped as 'test' panic rises

By DOUGLAS WIGHT and KIRSTEN DANIS

Nervous New Yorkers have "swamped" emergency rooms demanding anthrax tests — putting a strain on hospitals and labs, Health Commissioner Dr. Neal Cohen warned yesterday.

"Going to an emergency room for a nasal-swab test is really overtaxing very valuable resources, and it just doesn't make any sense," Cohen said.

A swab reveals an exposure to anthrax spores — not the disease itself — and the city is already testing people where exposures have occurred, Cohen said.

The warning was issued after St. Vincents Catholic Medical Centers, which operates eight hospitals in the city, called the mayor's office to complain about panicked patients flooding emergency rooms and phone lines.

On Tuesday night, dozens of frantic commuters who spotted dust on the Staten Island Ferry ran to St. Vincents Hospital on Staten Island for tests.

"There's a mass hysteria that occurs, and people stormed the emergency room," said Dr. Steven Garner, the hospital's chief medical officer.

Anxious New Yorkers rushed to St. Vincents in Manhattan after the NBC case was announced a week ago, Garner said.

"People have a right to be concerned; there are so many mysteries about anthrax. But we can't test everyone in New York," said Dr. Bernd Reisbeck, a St. Vincents critical-care doctor.

The Health Department would not say what other hospitals have been hit with an influx of worried New Yorkers.

An informal survey of 18 hospitals by the Greater New York Hospital Association on Sunday showed only 150 people worried about anthrax had visited emergency rooms, mostly in Manhattan.

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