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Cleanup Worries

Residents, doctors see WTC health risks

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The air quality and round-the-clock cleanup near the World Trade Center has left many residents near there sick and traumatized, according to testimony at a City Council hearing yesterday.

According to residents of the area, as well as doctors and other experts, the environmental risks near Ground Zero are far greater than what the city or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency say.

Dr. Stephen Levin, medical director of the Mount Sinai Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine, told the Committee on Environmental Protection that dozens of people developed illnesses from working or living near the site.

The problems include onset asthma, facial pain, upper respiratory dysfunction, chronic laryngitis, chest tightness, wheezing and psychological stress.

He said the most serious problem was several new cases of asthma in adults working in nearby offices.

"Whenever there's onset asthma in an adult we always suspect an environmental problem," Levin said. "We're seeing it among office workers and that's worrisome because they're . . . harder to protect."

Some testified that the level of asbestos is more prevalent and harmful than what the EPA told the committee last week.

David Newman, of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, said the EPA's view that asbestos levels were not high enough to pose long-term health risks left him concerned.

"While diseases such as asbestosis result from exposure to asbestos over long periods of time, asbestos-related cancers, such as mesothelioma, which have a 10- to 40-year latency period, can develop from low-level exposure to this killing dust," Newman said.

EPA spokeswoman Mary Mears disagreed.

"Given the levels of asbestos we don't think there is any kind of significant health risk for people working or living near the site," she said. "But there could be some risk to the workers who are actually on the site where the levels tend to be the highest."

The most emotional testimony came from Diane Lapson, who represented about 1,000 tenants in three buildings at Independence Plaza along Greenwich Street in lower Manhattan.

Many residents are reminded of the terrorists attacks every day by trucks that haul debris and dump steel beams onto containers like a "violent thunder."

"I wish everyone could come and take a tour and witness the World Trade Center falling over and over again," she said. "We basically feel helpless."

The mayor's office and the city Department of Health did not return calls late yesterday.

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