

Dust from WTC contained 'witches' brew' of pollutants

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PISCATAWAY — The tons of dust that settled on streets and cars, and in homes and offices, after the collapse of the World Trade Center contained an unprecedented mixture of contaminants, including asbestos, lead, and carcinogens, a leading environmental scientist said Friday.

A lengthy analysis of samples found that particles in the dust cloud came in all shapes and sizes. Some of the larger particles might only irritate the throat, but others were small enough to lodge deep in the lungs, said Paul Lioy, acting associate director of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute in Piscataway.

"I call this a witches' brew" of material that could be inhaled, Lioy said in a presentation at the institute before more than 100 scientists, doctors, and students. "You have the potential for particles being deposited in all different areas" of the respiratory system.

Lioy said it's too early to draw conclusions about potential long-term health effects.

That work will take time and should include tracing the health of the many rescue workers, commuters, and residents exposed to the dust, he said. Federal officials want to start a registry of all people who may have been exposed to the lower Manhattan air in the hours and days after the Twin Towers' collapse, Lioy said.

Researcher urges health effects study

The study presented Friday is the second on the topic to emerge this week. University of California scientists announced Monday that their tests showed the highest levels of certain pollutants ever seen, greater even than those measured in Kuwait after Iraqis torched oil wells during the Persian Gulf war.

The Environmental Protection Agency has come under fire for allegedly misleading the public soon after Sept. 11 about the potential hazards of the dust. EPA Administrator Christie Whitman said on Sept. 18 that she was "glad to reassure the people of New York that ... their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink." An EPA regional administrator said the agency had done more extensive testing prior to Whitman's announcement than it had ever conducted before.

But, at a Senate hearing this week, a Democratic congressman from New York criticized the EPA for making this announcement after testing only the air outdoors and not the air and dust inside buildings near the trade center site.

For the analysis released Friday, scientists tested dust taken from cars and building ledges on the fifth and sixth days after the attacks. They found, as they expected, that the dust was mainly construction debris ranging from paint particles to paper fragments.

Lioy said researchers were surprised to find high levels of a class of chemicals called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons — which includes carcinogens — in the dust. These chemicals came from unburned fuel from the jets that crashed into the towers, as well as from plastic and other materials that ignited, the study said.

The scientists were also surprised to find a high concentration of fine glass fibers, the result of pulverized windows, Lioy said. Dirt attached to these fibers might irritate the throat of anyone who breathes them in, which he said could account for the so-called "World Trade Center cough" that some rescue workers and New Yorkers have complained about, he said.

The people most at risk of long-term health effects are those exposed to the initial cloud of dust. "People were basically engulfed in this plume," he said.

The researchers for the study included staff from New York University, federal agencies, Rutgers University, and the University of Dentistry and Medicine of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. The institute is run jointly by Rutgers and the medical school.

Air quality in the area is now normal for New York City, and possibly even a little bit cleaner because there is less traffic, Lioy said.

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