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Taking a Breath of Fear Illnesses Bring New Doubts About Toxic Exposure Near Ground Zero By Christine Haughney

**Washington Post Staff Writer NEW YORK –**

There was something about the air. For a while after Sept. 11, George Tabb and his wife tried to stick it out in their apartment just north of the World Trade Center, tried to ignore his twice-nightly asthma attacks and her pounding headaches. Eventually, they moved in with Tabb's stepfather. But Tabb still goes home to pick up his mail, and within 20 minutes the metallic taste returns to his mouth, and the wheezing. "All of a sudden, boom, I've got a nosebleed, the asthma, a headache," he said. Recently Tabb received evidence that the air in his apartment may be as dangerous as he suspects. Independent tests -- results of which are disputed by the city -- found that dust taken from an air vent in his apartment building's hallway contained 555 times the suggested acceptable level for asbestos. Samples from a bathroom vent show dangerous levels of fiberglass. "No one knows what was burning down there" at ground zero, he said. "I am concerned that in five years or 10 years, I'm going to be part of a cancer cluster." Nearly four months after the World Trade Center attacks, the fires there are largely extinguished. But fears of the toxic brew left behind in lower Manhattan's air remain -- as do concerns that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other government agencies did not warn residents sufficiently or soon enough of the dangers. Many of those who live or work downtown report strikingly similar symptoms: nosebleeds, sore throats, bronchial infections and an endless racking cough. "People's airways are narrowing down," said Dr. Stephen Levin, medical director of the nationally renowned Mount Sinai I.J. Selikoff Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine. "We have cases of new onset reactive airway disease for people who were in excellent physical condition prior to September 11th." (snip) In the weeks after the World Trade Center towers fell, tens of thousands of New Yorkers tried to decide whether it was safe to move back into apartments and businesses near the site of the attacks. The EPA played a leading role in calming those fears. "I am glad to reassure the people of New York . . . that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink," EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman said a week after the attacks. "The good news for the residents of New York is that the air, while smoky, is not dangerous," an EPA spokeswoman told the Los Angeles Times at about the same time. And at the end of September, another spokeswoman, citing recent tests for asbestos, told the New York Daily News: "There was not a significant risk, even in the early days." The agency released selected test results that seemed to buttress those assertions. But the EPA also found more troubling results, and it did not release that data until after the nonprofit New York Environmental Law and Justice Project filed a Freedom of Information Act request. These tests found elevated levels of dioxin, PCBs, lead and chromium, all toxic substances, in the air, soil and water around the site. full: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A11173-2002Jan7.html Louis Proyect Marxism mailing list: http://www.marxmail.org