

Health effects linger from Sept. 11

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When George Kielb began to suffer heartburn a few years ago, he thought about what he had for dinner and whether it was bringing on the searing sensation in his throat.

But even bland food was giving him indigestion, and it kept getting worse.

"I'd wake up in the middle of night, feeling like I was choking to death," said Kielb, a 48-year-old battalion chief with the Yonkers Fire Department

Kielb did not connect his symptoms with his work at Ground Zero. He had developed the so-called World Trade Center cough a few months earlier, but heartburn? Yet, his doctor told him it was related even though he spent just two days working on "The Pile" on Sept. 12 and 13, 2001.

And five years later, Kielb still suffers both respiratory problems and what is technically called gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD.

"It's just amazing that something for such a short duration is going to bother so many people for such a long time," Kielb said.

Kielb was among thousands exposed to the toxic aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and remains one of the thousands still ill from it. Even five years later, no one knows exactly how many people are sick — or may become sick — because of Sept. 11. By one estimate, up to 400,000 people in New York City sustained some exposure to the dust, smoke and chemicals in the downtown air.

Some illnesses, including asthma, sinusitis and GERD, have been definitively linked to work at Ground Zero. There is less certainty about the cancers that have started to emerge among responders.

"I think anybody who was down there realized that whatever people were breathing in was not good and there may be problems down the road, which there are now, obviously," said Patrick DeSarlo, 45, of New City, who was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a form of cancer, just months after he retired from the force. He spent about 10 days at Ground Zero.

The toxic mix at Ground Zero included carcinogens such as dioxins, PCBs, benzene and asbestos.

Roger Giese, the director of the Environmental Cancer Research Program at Northeastern University in Boston, said it was possible that cancer from an environmental exposure could arise this quickly.

Where to get help

Information on the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring Program is available at www.wtcexams.org or 888-702-0630.

Information on CREW, Center for Responders and Emergency Workers, is available at 914-666-2021.

"The problem is you don't know all the other exposures these various people had," Giese said. "And so maybe, if some of these people at Ground Zero already had a lot of other exposure, then this was just the last piece ... the final trigger for things."

Much of what is known about Trade Center illnesses comes from screening programs set up by the New York City Fire Department and by Mount Sinai Medical Center in Manhattan.

Of course, the almost 14,000 New York City firefighters who worked at Ground Zero had some of the greatest exposure to the toxins there. Some 650 have since met the strict criteria for permanent lung disability, according to the department.

Firefighters are also being diagnosed with rarely seen conditions such as sarcoidosis, which can cause scar tissue to form in the lungs and other organs. There have been 20 cases since Sept. 11 while there were 30 in total in the 15 years before the attacks, the department says.

One study compared lung-function tests done on firefighters before Sept. 11 and those done in the year afterward, providing an objective measurement of how they fared.

"We found a substantial drop in breathing capacity in the tests after compared to the tests before," said Dr. Gisela Banauch of the pulmonary division at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, the study author.

Banauch said the drop, equal to 12 years of age-related decline, could predispose firefighters to illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or asthma.

The World Trade Center Medical Monitoring Program at Mount Sinai has screened more than 16,000 responders, including volunteers and emergency workers, for health problems and treated 2,200. The screening continues even now at sites in New York City, Long Island and New Jersey. There are 100 new patients a month in the program and a 16-week wait to be seen.

"I have been astonished about how many new responders have been coming forward," said Dr. Robin Herbert, the director of the data and coordination center for the program.

Treatment is offered at no cost at locations, including St. John's Riverside Hospital in Yonkers.

About 85 percent of patients seen in the treatment program in the last year had disorders of the upper airway. About 47 percent had lower airway disorders, and 64 percent suffered from a gastrointestinal ailment.

"It's disturbing how many of our patients have not gotten back to where they were before Sept. 11, even with the most intensive of treatments," Herbert said.

The respiratory problems are easy to understand given the contaminants in the air, such as pulverized cement, glass fibers, asbestos and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, a combustion byproduct.

That so many people developed GERD is a little more puzzling, but could be tied to the very alkaline and irritating dust, Herbert said.

GERD is not simply heartburn and, if chronic and untreated, can lead to cancer of the esophagus. It can also exacerbate asthma.

"We need to treat GERD as aggressively as we're treating the sinus and lung problems that we're seeing," Herbert said.

Specialists are still treating the emotional effects of Sept. 11 as well. Almost 40 percent of those treated in the Mount Sinai program in the last year were being seen for psychological issues.

The Mental Health Association of Westchester has a program for emergency responders and those still receiving counseling typically show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks and depression, said Blanche Goodman, the program director.

Key in any discussion of the health consequences of Sept. 11 is what, if anything, could have been done to prevent illnesses.

A lawsuit filed on behalf of some 8,000 people who worked at Ground Zero says it is New York City's fault that responders and workers became ill because they were not given the proper protection. The suit is being brought by the White Plains firm Worby Groner Edelman. The city has moved to dismiss it.

David Worby, the lead attorney, said about 375 of those plaintiffs have been diagnosed with cancer since Sept. 11. Among them are DeSarlo and his New City neighbor, Ernest Vallebuona. Both worked for the New York Police Department on Sept. 11 and both responded to the Trade Center.

DeSarlo, a captain, said he did not really wear a mask for the 10 days he was at the site. He does not remember feeling any ill effects from his time at Ground Zero and said when he retired in January 2004 to spend more time with his four children, he thought he was healthy. Within nine months, he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a cancer of the plasma cells.

He said the first inkling that his cancer could be connected to Sept. 11 came when he was asked at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center about his environmental exposure to toxins such as Agent Orange, asbestos, burning steel and burning petroleum products.

"It became obvious," he said. "Yeah. Ground Zero. That's when it kind of hit me that it may be from there."

Vallebuona, a 41-year-old detective who spent several months at Ground Zero, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in October 2004 and came to believe it was because of his Ground Zero duty.

He has gone into remission once and had a reoccurrence. He is hoping the stem-cell transplant he had last year will put him into remission again.

Vallebuona was granted an accidental disability last month and is now retired.

"I come from a family of police officers — my father was a police officer, my grandfather," he said. "I certainly didn't want to have to retire as a cancer patient."
