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Startling Number Of 9/11 First Responders Stricken With Cancer

September 11, 2007

As the city marks another anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, many doctors fear a new wave of health problems among first responders – not lung and respiratory problems, but cancer – lies ahead.

And, if the diagnosis isn't bad enough, as NY1's Elizabeth Kaledin reports in the first of a two part series, some health experts won't officially acknowledge that 9/11 may be to blame.

September 11th will always be a day that overwhelms with numbers: 2,750 New Yorkers dead, 343 firefighters lost, and now there's a new statistic – a new number – that's growing.

More than 120 September 11th first responders, like John Walcott, have developed cancer.

"I went down there because there was the average person who was maybe burning alive, buried alive," says Walcott.

Walcott, a retired city detective spent more than a 1,000 hours at Ground Zero, breathing in the toxic soup of PCB's, asbestos, lead, dioxin and benzene from burning jet fuel – a known carcinogen.

"I had my own clothes and a police jacket [to protect myself at Ground Zero]," says Walcott. "If you were fortunate enough you got a paper mask, you were lucky enough, but I never got one."

In May of 2003, Walcott was diagnosed with leukemia. His story is eerily similar to that of Gary Acker who spent 33 days near the pile doing emergency communications work for AT&T.

"You could barely see a person standing eight to ten feet from you some nights," says Acker.

Acker now has a rare form of another blood cancer known as multiple myeloma. He was diagnosed in August of 2003. He says he toiled away in the ruins, believing the air was safe to breathe.

"I guess I'm just gullible," says Acker. "I was going work through it and try and help in some way."

"He's in constant bone pain because of this," says Dr. James Salwitz, Ackers doctor.

Salwitz says it's an extremely unusual case. Before getting sick, Acker was a healthy, athletic man who never smoked.

"Two years later, suddenly and overwhelmingly, he comes down with an uncommon cancer," says Salwitz. "And you have to be really astonished – that's hard to believe that it's a coincidence."

But not everyone is convinced 9/11 is causing a new wave of cancers. Doctors have been reluctant to discuss the issue on the record. Even the American Cancer Society wouldn't comment for this story. It's too hard to find definitive proof, they say, linking 9/11 to cancer.

That's making it hard for people like John Walcott and Gary Acker to get any 9/11 related benefits. Now the two men are part of a huge lawsuit seeking compensation from the city.

"The odds of there being 130 John Walcotts and Gary Ackers and people like that who you are going to meet could be one in a trillion," said the men's attorney David Worby. "It just doesn't happen."

And there is no question in the minds of people who are suffering through it.

"I'm a hundred percent sure that's what caused my leukemia," says Walcott.

- *Elizabeth Kaledin*

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