



**ANDREW J SPANO**  
County Executive

**Joshua Lipsman, M.D., M.P.H.**  
Commissioner, Department of Health

# ATTENTION

## Public Health

### Update

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The Westchester County Department of Health provides public health updates to members of the medical community on important issues affecting public health in Westchester

September 18, 2001

**ALERT:** Terrorist Attack at the World Trade Center in New York City:  
Medical and Public Health Issues of Concern

TO: Medical Directors, Emergency Department Directors, Infection Control Practitioners, Infectious Disease Physicians, , and Laboratory Directors:

**We are sending this broadcast alert to update you on ongoing public health issues following the terrorist attack at the World Trade Center on Tuesday, September 11, 2001.** Local health departments continue to work closely with New York City, State and Federal agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in a coordinated response to the World Trade Center disaster.

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**Please Share this Alert with the Following Key Staff at Your Hospital:**

- 1 – Hospital Administration**
- 2 – All Medical and Nursing Staff**
- 3 – Emergency Departments**
- 4 - Hospital Safety Director**
- 5 – Hospital Pharmacy and Laboratories**

**I. Concerns about Public Health Issues Related to the Disaster Site**

- A. **There is no threat to the health of the general public from decomposing human remains at the disaster site:** There are no risks of infectious disease epidemics among the general public related to the disaster site. Bad odors that are likely to arise from decomposing bodies, although unpleasant, are not harmful. NYCDOH is working closely with other local, state and federal agencies to ensure that workers on-site adhere to strict standard precautions to avoid contact with blood or body fluids.

During rescue operations, some rescue workers may come in contact with potentially contaminated body fluids. If such exposures occur percutaneously, to non-intact skin, or to mucous membranes, we suggest that facilities refer to their institutional protocols for managing potential exposures to blood-borne pathogens, or that they consult the infectious disease experts who routinely manage these situations in their hospitals.

- B. **Acute Stress Disorders:** Given the traumatic experience of last week's plane crashes into the World Trade Center, all New Yorkers, especially those personally affected by the disaster, those providing care to the victims or their families, and those working on the relief effort are likely to experience emotional distress. The following American Red Cross and Department of Mental Health Hotlines can provide direct access to services:

<b>American Red Cross</b>	<b>(914) 946-6500</b>
Westchester County Mental Health Association	<b>(914) 345-5900</b>
<b>Westchester Crisis Hotline</b>	<b>(914) 347-6400</b>

C. **Environmental Risks Posed by Asbestos and Dust**

Asbestos was used in the construction of the World Trade Center. Tests performed by various city, state and federal agencies indicate that asbestos may be present in low levels in the vicinity of the World Trade Center. For workers at the site, the health risk posed by short-term exposures is very low. The risk to persons who have not been present in the affected area following the disaster is also thought to be extremely low. There are no tests that can be done, including chest radiographs, to tell if exposure has occurred, nor to predict if pulmonary disease will occur in the future.

At a minimum, anyone who needs to enter the affected area should wear a disposable cup-type (i.e., not fan-folded or duck-bill) N100 or P100 respirator and goggles. Workers in contact with debris or surface dust in the affected area should contact their employers for specific recommendations regarding needed protective equipment.

Increased particulate matter and dust released during the days since the attack may cause eye and/or respiratory irritation, particularly for persons with underlying pulmonary disease, including asthma or COPD. Individuals who have a history of heart and lung conditions and who are in areas where smoke or dust is visible are advised to remain indoors with the windows shut. It is advised that air conditioners be operated on the "recirculate" mode, so that outside air is not pumped inside, or if this is not possible, that they be turned off. Persons who experience difficulty breathing or chest pain are advised to seek medical care immediately.

Environmental testing is continuing to better characterize levels of asbestos, dust particulates and other potentially hazardous materials within the affected site and in other off-site locations. In addition, the NYCDOH is monitoring issues related to food and water safety, rodent control, radiation levels and worker safety in the area around the World Trade Center site.

II. **Surveillance for Infectious Disease Outbreaks that may Represent Bioterrorism**

Since the terrorist attack on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, there has been ongoing monitoring for the possibility of a bioterrorist event in NYC or surrounding areas. **There is currently NO evidence that biological agents have been released; laboratory tests on environmental samples taken from the affected area after the attack were all negative.** Moreover, biologic agents would likely not have survived an explosion the magnitude of the World Trade Center attack. **Accordingly, NO prophylaxis is recommended for Westchester County residents or visitors to New York City.**

However the need to remain alert to the occurrence of unusual disease clusters or manifestations remains, given the increased concerns raised in general about terrorism. Surveillance systems are currently in place and include:

**Active Emergency Department (ED) Syndromic Surveillance**

Surveillance has been established at 15 New York City Hospitals for clinical syndromes that would likely



consequences of this tremendous tragedy.



After learning of any suspicious disease cluster, the WCDH will initiate an immediate investigation to determine the cause of illness as well as the mode of transmission.

For more detailed clinical information on specific pathogens that might be used in a bioterrorist event, consult the CDC Bioterrorism Preparedness Website: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov>.

Thank you for your assistance in these matters.

Sincerely,

*Amy S. Rosenberg*

Amy S. Rosenberg, M.D.  
Director, TB & Communicable Diseases

*Ada J. Huang*

Ada J. Huang, M.D.  
Deputy Commissioner, Disease Control