

Firefighters Battle Cough

Every one of the nearly 11,000 firefighters who raced to the rescue in the World Trade Center collapse will undergo screenings for respiratory problems. Nicknamed "World Trade Center cough," respiratory difficulties and a persistent cough have affected over 4,000 rescue workers at the Trade Center site.

Dr. David Prezant, chief pulmonologist for the New York Fire Department, said there has been a sudden increase in respiratory problems among firefighters. Up to 40 percent of the respondents need medical care and treatment for their breathing problems that, in the severest cases, require mechanical ventilation. Prezant said that in a random sampling of 100 sick firefighters, airway hyperreactivity was found in 25 of them, an indication that they could develop asthma from their exposure.

Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen announced that all FDNY employees have been asked to undergo a four-hour medical exam to determine whether they face long-term damage to their lungs from breathing in dust, pulverized concrete and debris at the WTC site.

Testing will continue until every firefighter is examined - a two-month job at up to 170 examinations per day.

On site, all workers in the area are encouraged to wear respirators, Von Essen added.

"This is a major problem that no one is talking about," said Prezant. "We don't know if [these conditions] will be permanent."

(Compiled from news and wire reports)