



Anthrax vs Flu Symptoms

Symptoms such as dizziness, confusion, nausea, vomiting, and shortness of breath may indicate inhaled anthrax infection in patients presenting with influenza-like illnesses, say researchers funded by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ).

The study team at Cornell University's Weill Medical College combined data from the 11 inhaled anthrax cases from the 2001 mail attacks with 17 historical cases. They compared features of those cases with more than 4000 cases of common viral respiratory tract infections.

Many symptoms, notably fever and cough, overlap. But neurological and gastrointestinal symptoms occur mainly in anthrax infections, while sore throats and runny noses most likely herald the common flu.

Carolyn Clancy, MD, AHRQ's director, said that the study is being used to develop the first evidence-based anthrax screening protocol. Such guidelines will help emergency management and public health authorities rapidly and accurately assess potential anthrax attacks, she said (*Ann Intern Med.* 2003;139:337-345).

Public Misled About Post-9/11 Air Quality

In the days following the September 11, 2001, collapse of the World Trade Center towers in New York, the White House told the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to reassure the public that breathing the air in lower Manhattan was safe, although the agency did not have sufficient data to support the assertion, concludes an internal report from the EPA's inspector general. The agency subsequently deleted cautionary language and added reassuring words to a number of public statements released in the days and weeks following the tragedy, the report says.

The report is available online at http://www.epa.gov/oigearth/reading_room/WTC_report_20030821.pdf.

In particular, the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) told the EPA to remove a statement advising lower Manhattan residents to seek professional cleaning services for potentially contaminated rooms. Instead, the EPA advised residents to follow the New York City Department of Health's less rigorous



Andrea Booher/FEMA

New Yorkers were misled about air quality following the World Trade Center attack, according to EPA's inspector general.

cleaning guidelines. Statements about potentially dangerous airborne asbestos levels were also deleted from EPA statements released within days of the attack (September 13 and September 16) at the behest of the CEQ, which advises the president and helps coordinate federal environmental policy.

The document states that members of the CEQ refused to meet or otherwise cooperate with the inspector general during the investigation leading to the report. It also notes that the EPA chief of staff refused to take "ownership" for the misleading early press releases, saying that the White House played a role and that "final approval came from the White House." She said that "other considerations, such as the desire to reopen Wall Street" were taken into account when preparing these announcements.

Accurate assessment of the health risks of breathing air in lower Manhattan following the tragedy will take years,

according to the report; the extent of public exposure to toxins and a lack of research-based benchmarks impedes such research.

Cancer Death Rates Decline

The death rates for lung, breast, prostate, and colorectal cancer in the United States declined in the late 1990s, according to the "Annual Report to the Nation on the Status of Cancer" published by the National Cancer Institute, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the American Cancer Society.

The prostate cancer death rate dropped most dramatically, falling on average 4% per year from 1994-2000 to a rate of 32.9 deaths per 100 000 cases. However, the death rate for black men remained much higher, 73 deaths per 100 000 cases. Deaths from lung cancer dropped an average of 0.7% per year from 1991-2000 to 56.8 deaths per 100 000 cases; deaths from colorectal cancer dropped an average of 1.7% per year from 1984-2000 to 21.2 deaths per 100 000 cases; and female deaths from breast cancer dropped an average of 2.3% per year from 1990-2000 to 27.7 deaths per 100 000 cases (*J Natl Cancer Inst.* 2003;95:1276-1299).

NIH Student Loan Program

A little-known loan repayment program at the National Institutes of Health is now accepting applications from PhD and MD professionals pursuing research careers in general clinical medicine, pediatrics, fertility, or health disparities.

The program, which awards loans of up to \$35 000 per year, is open to US citizens, permanent residents, and US nationals. Applications for 2004 awards must be completed online by December 31, 2003. Information about applying is available at <http://www.lrp.nih.gov>.

—Brian Vastag