



## **Considerations for children and their families following the East Harlem Building collapse**

On the morning of 3/12/14, two residential buildings in East Harlem collapsed due to an explosion and subsequent fires from a suspected gas leak. The main health concerns are breathing in dust and debris from the collapsed buildings, as well as smoke, dust, and gases from the fire and stress. Air pollution related to fires often follows the path of the smoke plumes, which depend on wind patterns. Generally, air pollution levels rapidly decline once the fires are out.

**Health effects of air pollution:** Symptoms of air pollution exposures are irritation of the eyes, nose, throat; coughing; wheezing; and shortness of breath. Children with chronic diseases such as asthma and heart disease may experience worsened symptoms. Generally, the symptoms resolve when the exposure is removed. It is unlikely that there will be long term health effects from this exposure.

### **Key Health messages**

#### About air pollution...

- Avoid exposure to smoke and debris if possible. Minimize outdoor activity in areas where you can see or smell smoke.
- In the immediate aftermath of the collapse, close your windows and doors if you live near the site. Seal intact windows with wet towels.
- Persons with asthma should avoid areas where they see or smell smoke or debris. Keep asthma medications on hand.
- Once air quality returns to normal, open windows to increase ventilation.

#### About dust and debris...

- Clean your home with wet mopping and wet dusting to capture dust. Use a HEPA- filtered vacuum if possible.
- Professionals should manage clean-up operations. Precautions should be taken to avoid possible asbestos and lead hazards. As the buildings date to the early 1900s, it is possible that asbestos and lead may have been present.
- If participating in the clean-up, use a fit-tested respirators which includes N95 face masks. These masks can protect you from dust but not gases and vapors from debris or cleaning products so ventilation is still important.
- Pregnant women, children and teenagers should not be involved in cleanup of affected areas.
- Promptly and thoroughly dry any water damaged areas. Be alert for mold growth in the weeks following the event, since surrounding buildings may have water damage.

#### About stress...

- Emotional effects are often overlooked after disasters. Children might react in unexpected ways. See resources below about recognizing symptoms of stress and helping children cope.

## **To keep your indoor air healthy on a daily basis:**

- Avoid smoking and burning candles indoors.
- Never use your cooking stove for heat and never use charcoal grills indoors.
- Use the exhaust fan when cooking.
- Ensure that you have working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.
- Have ventilation systems cleaned and checked regularly.
- If you smell a gas leak, evacuate the building immediately, and call 911.

## **Resources:**

### **For information on how to speak to children about a disaster:**

<http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/children-and-disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx>

<http://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/> (includes information in Spanish)

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/data/chi33-1\\_index.html](http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/data/chi33-1_index.html)

### **For information on fire, smoke and effects on air quality:**

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/environmental/smoke.shtml>

### **For information on Carbon Monoxide poisoning:**

[http://aoec.org/pehsu/documents/carbon\\_monoxide\\_poisoning\\_in\\_children\\_guidance\\_for\\_disaster\\_events\\_july2013\\_millier.pdf](http://aoec.org/pehsu/documents/carbon_monoxide_poisoning_in_children_guidance_for_disaster_events_july2013_millier.pdf)

### **For information from the NYC Fire Department on what to do if you smell a gas leak:**

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/pdf/safety/fire\\_safety\\_education/2010\\_02/14\\_natural\\_gas\\_english.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/pdf/safety/fire_safety_education/2010_02/14_natural_gas_english.pdf)

### **For information on personal protective equipment in emergency workers:**

[http://nycosh.org/uploads/control\\_of\\_hazards/Sandy%20respirator%20fact%20sheet%20111112.pdf](http://nycosh.org/uploads/control_of_hazards/Sandy%20respirator%20fact%20sheet%20111112.pdf)

### **For information on mold:**

<http://www.epa.gov/mold/moldguide.html>

## **Where can I get more information?**

For patient information contact the Mount Sinai Patient hotline: 212-241-7707

The New York City Unified Victim Identification System (UVIS) has been activated. If you are concerned about the welfare of someone who may have been affected by the collapse and are unable to contact them, please call 311. From outside of NYC, you may call (212) 639-9675.

The American Red Cross has a reception at the Salvation Army located at 175 East 125th Street to receive and support anyone affected by this tragedy. Anyone who's been affected by this tragedy, needs a place to go and be safe, needs counseling or emotional support, needs information, needs food and water, can go to the Red Cross Center.

You may also contact the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene at 311.

For information on reducing environmental exposures, contact the Mount Sinai Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit at 1-866-265-6201.

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