Deaths from 9/11-related illness are set to exceed initial toll

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Fifteen years have passed, and the agony goes on for those who survived the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. More than 1000 people may have died from health problems linked to the terrorist incidents – and the number is rising every year.

The latest official data released by the World Trade Center Health Program – set up in 2010 to offer healthcare to those still in ill health as a result of the 2001 attacks – reveals a sharp rise in the number of people diagnosed with cancers that have been linked to dust generated when New York's Twin Towers collapsed.

The data shows that 50,000 people have been certified sick as a probable consequence of the attacks and 1140 have died – which is more than a third of the 2977 deaths on 9/11 itself.

Cancer rising

Respiratory and digestive disorders account for the highest number of cases, which reached 32,291 as of 30 June 2016. But cancer cases are rising fastest, tripling from 1822 in January 2014 to 5441 in June 2016.
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Given typical survival profiles for cancer patients, some health professionals are now predicting that by 2020, more people will have died through fallout from the attacks than died on 9/11.

"It's not based on hard numbers, but on the growing number of people who are going down with cancers," says Ben Chevat, a spokesman for the support group, 9/11 Health Watch.

Many survivors of the 9/11 attacks have developed dust-related illnesses / Rex Shutterstock

According to Chevat, it is difficult to say with certainty that individuals have died through exposure to fallout from 9/11. But he says that in 50 years' time, an excess of cancer deaths in New Yorkers may be much more obvious, and people will doubtless link it to the carcinogen-filled dust that blanketed parts of New York in September 2001. Some 150 chemicals in the fallout dust have already been identified as cancer-causing, he says.

Gap in the data

If anything, the current figure of 1140 deaths probably fails to capture all 9/11-linked fatalities – particularly because cases only began to be recorded five years ago. "We wouldn't have data for deaths before 2011," says Christy Spring, a spokeswoman for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Research last year comparing the health of New York firefighters before and after the event revealed a rise in cases of autoimmune disease. More spikes in disease may be found as health data increases in the wake of the disaster.

Aside from respiratory disease and cancer, the other major disease area linked to 9/11 has been mental health, with 12,500 certified cases so far in the health programme.