

17 years after 9/11, former NYPD cop still battles serious health problems

September 11 2018



Peter Woods was “as healthy as a horse” when he worked for the NYPD. Then came 9/11 and years of serious health problems.

Peter Woods hardly called in sick back when he worked for the New York Police Department. Then terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, creating a noxious cloud of finite glass, cancer-causing chemicals and other pollutants that hovered for months around ground zero.

"I was healthy before 9/11," said Woods, a retired police sergeant whose simple statement echoes thousands of others expressed by first responders and volunteers who helped with rescue and cleanup efforts. "I was as healthy as a horse."

But within a few years of Sept. 11, Woods was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease that often affects the lungs and lymph nodes in the chest, as well as sinusitis and [sleep apnea](#). All are conditions recognized and covered by the federally funded World Trade Center Health Program.

But Woods, 57, also developed [kidney disease](#), and then [heart disease](#), two serious conditions that aren't. He fears what other ailments might eventually emerge for him and others in his position.

Researchers so far have linked respiratory illnesses, certain types of cancer, acid reflux, sleep apnea, post-traumatic stress disorder to the collapse of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

Many of the problems centered around the enormous dust cloud created by the fall of the twin towers. Fires on the ground scorched for days, adding burnt carcinogenic particles to air already filled with asbestos, fiberglass and other deadly chemicals.

More recently, studies have found some 9/11 survivors who have [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) are more likely than survivors without PTSD to have strokes and [heart](#) attacks.

Heart disease, however, is not recognized as a World Trade Center-related condition.

Neither is the autoimmune disease that ultimately destroyed Woods' kidneys, leading him to years of dialysis before he finally received a transplant. As with many kidney disease patients, Woods suddenly found himself with heart problems. His previously healthy cholesterol level skyrocketed.

In 2005, at age 44, he had the first of two heart stents inserted to open up blocked arteries. In January 2008, he underwent triple bypass surgery.

"There is no coincidence in any of this," he said.

Woods recently participated in a study conducted by Dr. Mary Ann McLaughlin, cardiovascular health and wellness director of Mount Sinai Heart at New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center. McLaughlin's research is examining "a critical knowledge gap" the extent of kidney [disease](#) among 9/11 survivors.

"This far out from 9/11, it's amazing that there are disorders we're still finding, especially with cancer rates that may be starting to climb, since it takes many years from initial exposure to a carcinogen to have the actual impact," she said.

Autoimmune disorders such as lupus also have become increasingly diagnosed among survivors.

"Many patients complain of increase in allergies and dermatitis since 9/11, leading doctors and researchers to suspect that the symptoms are due to hyperactive immune reactions from being inundated with so much pulverized material," she said. "These are part of the things you start to see years and years after a disaster."

More than 71,800 first responders and 16,600 survivors currently receive treatment through the World Trade Center Health Program. And the numbers grow each month by the hundreds.

Woods hopes to raise awareness about heart diseases and other conditions not yet recognized by the health program, which provides free treatment to those with certified 9/11-related illnesses.

"There are so many diseases that took too long it took 14 years to recognize some cancers. People died prior to getting that recognition," he said.

Woods said the most difficult impact has been the reverberations on his family.

His daughters, who were 4 and 6 when he underwent bypass surgery, often feared they wouldn't come home to their dad after school. And Woods missed years of their basketball and softball games because of dialysis.

"My kidneys were destroyed by 9/11, but it's not a problem recognized officially," he said. "I can only talk for me, but recognition would give me validation."

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Citation: 17 years after 9/11, former NYPD cop still battles serious health problems (2018, September 11) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-09-years-nypd-cop-health-problems.html>

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