

Officials warn of lead pollution risks after Notre-Dame blaze

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Cranes work at Notre Dame cathedral, in Paris, Thursday, April 25, 2019. French police scientists were starting to examine Notre Dame Cathedral on Thursday for the first time since last week's devastating fire. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus)

The fire that ravaged the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris last month

released lead particles that have settled in potentially dangerous amounts in areas surrounding the church, officials said Thursday.

Analysis carried out since the April 15 blaze has detected lead dust in "very significant" levels on some streets and pavements outside the cathedral, which remain off limits to the public.

Between 10-20 grammes of lead per kilogramme (g/kg) were detected in soil samples, compared with normal background levels of just 0.3 g/kg, according to a statement from the police and the ARS regional health service.

The fire destroyed the roof and steeple of the 850-year-old landmark, melting the large sheets of lead that covered an intricate wooden framework.

But officials said testing had not revealed any lingering lead pollution in the air, with all atmospheric analyses showing less than the legal limit of 0.25 microgrammes per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$).

And outside the areas immediately surrounding the cathedral, "no sample on the Ile de la Cite or along the banks of the Seine indicated any lead levels in soils above the benchmark level," the statement said.

The Robin des Bois (Robin Hood) environmental NGO estimates the roof and steeple contained more than 300 tons of lead that melted in the blaze, and has urged officials to "decontaminate" the site before carrying out any reconstruction work.

Lead pollution can cause neurological defects for humans, especially children, as well as nervous system and kidney problems.

Cleaning urged

Officials said the lead posed little danger to residents, since only "repeated ingestions" of the toxic metal would be harmful to health.

There have been no reports of acute lead poisoning since the fire.

But the statement urged residents to clean all surfaces in their homes with wet cloths or wipes and to avoid the use of vacuum cleaners.

People should also wash their hands regularly and keep their fingernails cut short.

It also advised parents to wash toys often, since the faster metabolism in children under six makes any exposure to lead a particular risk.

Pregnant women should also take precautions to protect their babies from any exposure.

"Additional investigations are under way and testing will be carried out regularly to measure lead levels and ensure that health risks are kept under control," officials said.

The cathedral is expected to remain closed to visitors for years as workers clear away debris before embarking on an ambitious plan to restore the roof within five years.

The government has launched an international architectural competition for the reconstruction, raising the prospect of modern touches to a structure dating from the 13th century.

A YouGov poll this month found that 54 percent of respondents wanted the cathedral rebuilt exactly as it was, with only a quarter supporting the idea of adding a modern architectural touch to the historic building.

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