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Mystery illness plagues B.C. firefighters

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BREAKING NEWS

CRANBROOK, B.C. A crew of firefighters in southeastern British Columbia has been hit by a mysterious illness, with more than a quarter of 400 men and camp personnel sick.

Some 107 weary firefighters who for months have been battling blazes in hot, smoke-filled forests were recuperating Tuesday from various symptoms including respiratory problems, coughing, sore throats, fevers, sore eyes, diarrhea and vomiting.

One of the men in the Moyie fire camp, about 15 kilometres southwest of Cranbrook, was admitted to hospital with pneumonia, but after a day of tests and fluids, was released.

Although tests will not be conclusive for a couple of days, medical experts said it looks as though the firefighter's smoke-filled lungs have been attacked by a virus.

"What we are likely dealing with is exposure to irritant smoke and a virus infection on top of that," Dr. Perry Kendall, B.C.'s provincial health officer, said Tuesday.

"These guys are exhausted and tired, exposed to high levels of heat and dust in the air. It's dangerous, hard, heavy work. They've been doing it for a long time."

Medical officials became alarmed late last Saturday, when several men coming off their shift on the fire line complained of nauseousness and breathing problems.

After probing all 400 firefighters by Sunday, almost 100 men and women said they, too, felt ill. A makeshift infirmary was set up among the camp, which has dozens of trailers and tents in which firefighters sleep and eat.

About a dozen ill firefighters slept on cots Sunday in the infirmary tent, and most firefighters were put on IV drips and received oxygen. The remaining sick were told to drink plenty of liquids and to thoroughly wash their hands.

Another 10 firefighters who became ill Monday moved into the infirmary tent

_ with six being released Tuesday and the remaining four staying overnight for observation, said Dr. Nelson Aimes of B.C. Interior Health after visiting the camp Tuesday.

Although rumours of a SARS outbreak was running rampant throughout the camp, Aimes said medical officials didn't entertain the thought.

"They aren't that sick," he said. "SARS means acute respiratory problems and there's nothing that fits that bill here."

"We don't even know if it's an infectious process."

Tests have ruled out a water or food bore infection.

One firefighter said he and his colleagues were taken aback to see medical personnel walking through camp with their faces covered with cloth masks.

"It was quite shocking. I've never seen anything like that in all the years I've worked on fires," said the veteran firefighter who asked not to be named. "Everyone was saying, 'What's going on?' "

Forestry officials said the illness didn't greatly hamper efforts fighting the Cranbrook-area Lamb Creek and Plumbob fires.

Steve Bachop of B.C. Forest Service said many firefighters were off the fire line for two to three days, slowing down the mop up process of putting out hot spots.

There are about 1,000 firefighters working for B.C. Forest Service and hundreds of other firefighters from Ontario and Saskatchewan.

After working 12 to 16 hour shifts, for 14 consecutive days, crews then get a two-day break.