

PROTECT YOUR FUTURE

WHAT EVERY NEW FIRE FIGHTER SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THEIR CANCER RISK



This factsheet was developed by the International Association of Fire Fighters and the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.

Cancer is the leading cause of fire fighter line-of-duty deaths and prevention should start at the beginning of a fire fighter's career. Building strong cancer-prevention habits from day one can make a lifelong difference.

KNOW THE RISKS

It is important to know the risks associated with the job both on the fireground and at the fire station. Some common fire fighter exposures linked to cancer include:

- Diesel exhaust
- Fireground smoke and soot
- Contaminated turnout gear
- Shift work and disrupted sleep
- Poor nutrition and hydration

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) Working Group classified the occupation of firefighting as carcinogenic to humans (Group 1), IARC's highest carcinogenic hazard classification. This is supported by epidemiological studies and mechanistic evidence.¹

KNOW HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Contamination can occur at all stages of fire response when any amount of smoke is present for any duration of time. This includes when smoke is visible and/or when you can smell smoke. It is important to know how to protect yourself before, during, and after calls.

BEFORE THE CALL:

- Wear clean, well-maintained gear
- Check SCBA and commit to wearing it through overhaul

DURING THE CALL:

- Utilize SCBA from initial attack through overhaul
- Avoid touching face, eating, or drinking before gross decontamination



¹ IARC Working Group on the Identification of Carcinogenic Hazards to Humans. (2023). *Occupational Exposure as a Firefighter*. International Agency for Research on Cancer.

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AFTER THE CALL:

- Conduct preliminary exposure reduction (PER) or gross decontamination of gear and tools
- After on-scene gross decontamination and before eating or drinking, wash hands with soap and water
- Bag contaminated gear and transport in an outside compartment
- Use disposable wipes for face, neck, and all areas of exposed skin, and hand sanitizer for hands
- Shower within the hour or as soon as possible upon returning to the station
- Keep PPE out of living and eating areas
- Use second set of gear if available

REPORT YOUR EXPOSURES

Many states and provinces have passed presumptive laws that link firefighting with a disease or condition; however, many claims are initially denied. Documentation of the fire fighter's exposure can connect the disease to the documented exposure.

Fire fighters should track their own exposures in case they develop an occupational disease or cancer. Each fire fighter should establish their own method of capturing and documenting their exposures using department systems or programs like the [International Public Safety Data Institute \(IPSDI\) Exposure Tracker](#). Make sure to fully document all fire or chemical exposures on incident reports and personal exposure reports and be as detailed as possible.

GET YOUR SCREENINGS

Early detection saves lives. Make sure to participate in your department's annual physicals and cancer screenings.

- Report any unusual symptoms to your doctor early (e.g., skin changes, unexplained fatigue, lumps, persistent cough)
- Be familiar with your department's occupational health program

ADVOCATE FOR A SAFER CULTURE

Fire fighters are exposed to carcinogens at every fire, and the choices you make today – from SCBA use to decontamination and ongoing health monitoring – will shape not only your career, but your health, retirement years, and quality of life.

Protect each other by supporting a clean-gear culture and rejecting the idea that dirty gear is a badge of honor. Speak up for safer practices, look out for your crew, and encourage consistent decontamination and regular health screenings.