

SHARING A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

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



Deciding how and when to share a cancer diagnosis can feel like standing at the start of a long, uncertain road. For many fire fighters, the instinct is to protect others (e.g., spouses, kids, crew) by keeping the news to themselves; however, communication is a vital step toward building understanding and practical support. How, when, and with whom you share is your choice. What matters most is that it is done in a way that protects your privacy, aligns with your values, and gives you control over your own story.

UNDERSTANDING COMMON REACTIONS

You may feel conflicted – including wanting to be honest but still hesitant about your emotions and the reactions from others. Families and friends can often respond with intense worry or overprotectiveness. Crews might mask discomfort with humor or silence. These responses are normal. Preparing for them can reduce frustration and help you stay focused on what you need most: accurate information sharing and emotional steadiness.

WORKPLACE CONSIDERATIONS

News spreads fast in the firehouse, sometimes faster than you intend. Partnering early with your Local union leadership can help manage confidentiality, coordinate department communication, and prevent misunderstandings about duty status or performance. Leaders can also help access sick leave pools, insurance benefits, or peer support programs.

WAYS TO PREPARE:

- Identify your “first circle.” Choose two or three trusted people to tell first – your partner, closest family, a friend on your crew, or union representative.
- Plan your message. Write down what you want to share and what you want to keep private. A short script helps you stay grounded if emotions rise.
- Choose a setting that feels appropriate, secure, and feels meaningful. For example, when a space is private and distraction-free, it can help foster genuine conversations.
- Set clear boundaries. It’s okay to say, “I appreciate your concern, but I’m not ready to talk about that yet.”
- Expect a range of emotions (for yourself and others). Some may cry; others may jump into problem-solving mode. None of these reactions define your experience.

CULTURAL NOTE: STRENGTH IN VULNERABILITY

In the fire service, strength can be seen as measured by endurance – pushing through pain, keeping the crew steady. However, strength can also mean transparency and trust. When sharing your diagnosis in your own words, you’re reinforcing a culture that values honesty and care, not silence and stoicism.

ACTION ITEMS/CHECKLIST

- Identify who to tell first – family, trusted peers, leadership, etc.
- Prepare a personal script to stay in control of your message.
- Anticipate varied reactions and plan responses.
- Coordinate with union leadership before workplace disclosure.
- Maintain daily routines to support normalcy and reduce anxiety.

