

THE VFA QUARTERLY

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Trifecta For Surviving Firefighter Cancer

Numerous researches show contributions of health risks like cancer in jobs has made firefighting one of the most dangerous professions ever. There were two studies on firefighter cancer by The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health that showed a 9% increased diagnosis in the population of the US.

There is sufficient data that also links firefighting to cancer. However, there is still a lot to be learned about the magnitude of this risk, types, specific exposures, etc. But with what we know of, let's focus on three major categories: awareness, prevention, and early detection.

Cancer Awareness

Even though research is still being carried out and is focused on directing prevention, the policies to decrease rates of cancer start with increasing awareness. The key rationale is the early detection of it to gain more time to cure and stop it from metastasizing. For example, colon cancer detected at an early stage has a 90% chance of survival.

The use of proper PPE and SCBA does not completely block the carcinogens at fireground exposures. The modifiable risk factors do include the use of tobacco, poor nutrition and obesity, poor fitness, sleep deprivation, and alcohol binge drinking. Studies have found that firefighting is associated with an increased risk of urinary cancer, testicular cancer, melanoma, myeloma, prostate cancer, bladder cancer, lung cancer, leukemia, kidney cancer, brain cancer, and non-Hodgkin lymphoma. As a result, there are legislations to provide firefighters with compensation benefits if they develop cancer due to job-related exposure. Moreover, the potential cancer-causing agents identified with a structure fire include asbestos, benzene, arsenic, benzopyrene, cadmium, chromium, chlorophenols, polycyclic hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, ethylene oxide, formaldehyde, dioxins, hydrogen cyanide, glutaraldehyde, sulfur dioxide, vinyl chloride, polychlorinated biphenyls, orthotoluene, and dioxins.

Prevention

The focus on cancer prevention is based on exposures when leaving the fireground. It includes good turnout gear cleaning, no carrying of the gear inside enclosed vehicles and not keeping gear in the bay to avoid contamination of living environments. The rest includes focusing on fitness and diet that can be independent risk factors for different types of cancers. Until now the prevention efforts also included:

- Wear SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) along with PPE on trash, car and structure fires.
- Engineers (Pump Operators), command, and investigators should also wear SCBA and PPE.
- Remove contaminants on the skin with appropriate wipes.
- Make sure to wash hands before ingesting liquid or food.
- Transport tools, SCBA and PPE outside the cab and clean all the tools at the fire station.
- Shower off your body and change clothing as soon as possible.
- Frequently used items should not be stored for long over the diesel exhaust tip.
- Avoid tobacco and use sunscreen.
- Conduct medical exams.
- New particulate-blocking technology in PPE
- Do not store uncleaned PPE in the apparatus bay.
- Diesel exhaust systems should be used as recommended.

Early Detection

It is important that the fire department encourage their employees to complete a self-examination on a regular basis that compares the best practices with the current ones to reduce the cancer risk. Moreover, physical examination and screening tests are imperative for all firefighters for early detection that should be carried out annually. These include the hepatitis profile, weight and body-fat index, complete blood count, heart, and lung exam, abdominal and testicular exam, prostate and rectal exam, pulmonary function test, exercise stress echocardiogram test, mammograms for females, musculoskeletal exam and many more. While there is so much known about cancer and how it is related to firefighters, the work on it still has a long way to go. The reduction of this disease and deaths in the fire service will not only take the efforts from scientists but from firefighters, the fire department command, and the larger community who can understand the risks of the carcinogens they are interacting with and the rest of the actions that help prevent cancers from happening.

Every day, firefighters should respond to every call like always but use this trifecta (awareness, prevention, and early detection) to protect yourself from something that will always haunt us!



First Responder Crisis Support Helpline 1-844-550-HERO (4376)

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

This national helpline provides access to confidential support, resources and referrals any time day or night by phone for first responders and their families.

Wildfire Smoke and COVID-19

Wildfire smoke can irritate your lungs, cause inflammation, affect your immune system, and make you more prone to lung infections, including SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, preparing for wildfires might be a little different this year. Know how wildfire smoke can affect you and your loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic and what you can do to protect yourselves.

- Prepare for the wildfire smoke season as you would in any other year.
- Give yourself more time than usual to prepare for wildfire events. Home delivery is the safest choice for buying disaster supplies.
- Talk with a healthcare provider. Plan how you will protect yourself against wildfire smoke.
- During periods of extreme heat, pay attention to temperature forecasts and know how to stay safe in the heat.
- Some symptoms, like dry cough, sore throat, and difficulty breathing can be caused by both wildfire smoke exposure and COVID-19.
- Learn about symptoms of COVID-19. Symptoms like fever or chills, muscle or body aches, and diarrhea are not related to smoke exposure. If you have any of these symptoms, the CDC COVID-19 Self-Checker can help you determine whether you need further assessment or testing for COVID-19. If you have questions after using the CDC COVID-19 Self-Checker, contact a healthcare provider.
- People who currently have or who are recovering from COVID-19 may be at increased risk of health effects from exposure to wildfire smoke due to compromised heart and/or lung function related to COVID-19.
- Masks that are used to slow the spread of COVID-19 offer little protection against wildfire smoke. They do not catch small, harmful particles in smoke that can harm your health.

Maintaining Your Marriage In The Fire Service

By Lieutenant Brad Bouchillon
Statesboro (GA) Fire Department

Within the fire service, there is a general understanding that no task is done by one individual. You clean the station as a crew, you wash the rig as a crew, and you put fires out as a crew.

I did not fully comprehend this concept when I first interviewed for a job at the fire department I work at now. When asked a question about completing tasks, I said that I work best alone. What I meant is that if it was some sort of remedial task such as organizing paperwork or making a purchase order for new equipment, I would rather just do it myself and do it the best way I see fit; conversely, if it is a major task such as putting a fire out, I would much rather work as a team. Nevertheless, that answer initially cost me the job and simultaneously taught me a life lesson—working as a team is paramount, especially in our line of work. Luckily, I returned a year later for another interview and successfully got the job as a firefighter for the City of Statesboro (Georgia) Fire Department.

Several years after being on the job and enjoying working with a great crew, I met the love of my life and became part of another crew. My wife is my best friend and always has my back. We have not faced one thing in life alone since meeting one another. While the divorce rate for firefighters (14.1%) is not any higher than the general population, firefighters face a considerable amount of stress and have to work even harder to maintain strong and healthy relationships.

Communication

The biggest and most consistent problem in the fire service is communication. Reviewing any near-miss report or line-of-duty death will undoubtedly lead you to some paragraph that discusses how communication was a problematic factor in the incident. Around the station, common misunderstandings often create issues among shifts or between line personnel and administrative members.

This epidemic of miscommunication is not restricted to the firehouse. How many times have you had a major argument with your significant other where the root cause stems from either not communicating correctly or not communicating at all? I am just as guilty as anyone else for this. It has taken almost six years of marriage for my wife to get me to understand the importance of telling her what is on my mind and to express stress from work. For years I bottled my stress up and attempted to mask it. This works well until something happens, and a minor discussion becomes a full-on, hypertensive argument with raised-voices and loss of rational thinking.

Our significant others cannot understand the stress we face at work if we do not relay the information to them. I am not saying to expose them to any gruesome details about a call or even discuss the nature of any calls; a simple statement such as “Hey honey, I had a really rough shift yesterday so I apologize if I am on edge or not myself today,” goes a long, long way.

Quality Time

Too often are we quick to jump at the chance to meet the guys at the local bar or even go fishing all day. Yet, we often fall short of making the effort to spend quality time with our most important crew member. My wife has no problem with me going fishing, hunting or hanging out at one of the guys’ house for some burgers on the grill. However, she also hopes that I am equally willing to take her to see that new romantic-comedy or even just cook a meal at the house and eat at a candle-lit dining table instead of in front of the TV. This is really not a hard task to complete. I would be the first to admit that I do fall short at times.

Mental Health v. Marriage

This was not intended to be a marriage counseling article, but a reminder to take care of your best resource in regard to your mental well-being. A spouse is far more than someone to help pay bills and take the kids to practice; they are your counsel, your shoulder to cry on, and ears to listen to you.

Marriage is not always perfect and pretty, but at the end of the day you have to put it first and make sure you take good care of it. Otherwise, just like that rig you take to a call or that equipment you pull off of it, if it is not well maintained, it will fall apart. At the end of all of the stress from work (rough calls, aggravating supervisors, etc.) your spouse will be there for you. And I don’t know about you, but that is one way to keep a guy who runs into burning buildings for a living sane.

At the end of the day, if you do not take care of your mental health, your marriage can suffer. And if you do not take care of your marriage, your mental health can suffer. Thus, find that happy balance between family, work, and play. Just like an emergency incident, size any problems up, prioritize needs, and complete the objectives. If firefighters are able mitigate intense emergencies, I have full faith that we can handle our marriages too.

Brad Bouchillon has been working for the City of Statesboro Fire Department for over 10 years full-time and has held the rank of Lieutenant for over 7 years. He has also worked as a Lifeguard for Tybee Island Ocean Rescue and as an EMT part-time for Screven County EMS. Brad holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology with a specialization in Crisis Counseling. He started his Masters of Arts program in the fall of 2018 in Human Services Counseling with a Crisis Response and Trauma Cognate. He has been married to his wife Megan for 8 years. This article was reprinted with permission and originally appeared on American Military University’s blog, “In Public Safety.”

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The Volunteer Firefighter Alliance
is a national non-profit organization dedicated to assisting
Volunteer Fire Departments
and **Volunteer Firefighters.**

We would like to assist you through:

- **Free Fire Prevention Materials:** Your department can request free fire prevention activity books at www.freefireprevention.com
- **Free membership with 10k LODD Policy:** You can sign up at www.freelodd.com
- **Free recruitment public service announcement:** Your department can sign up at www.nvfrc.org
- **Free firefighter cancer prevention resources:** www.firefightercanceralliance.org



For more ways that the Volunteer Firefighter Alliance can assist your department
please visit us at **www.supportvfa.org**