

THE VFA QUARTERLY

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Cancer: Everyday Stuff Is Killing Us!

By Gene Cobb

The most dangerous thing about our line of work that involves encountering structure fires isn't the heat and flames, it's the smoke!

Cancer is the leading source of firefighters' line-of-duty deaths in the United States, and according to the International Association of Firefighters, around 60 percent of career firefighters will certainly die by cancer, not from other duties.

Firemen in the 1930's-40's from five Nordic countries were discovered to have a greater possibility of developing prostate cancer as well as skin cancer. In 2013, researchers examining 30,000 firefighters in three U.S. cities found the occupation was associated with "tiny to moderate rises" for various cancers, especially in the respiratory, digestive, and urinary systems. The study likewise realized that a likelihood of lung cancer diagnoses increased with every fire call.

The real problem is our "stuff" at home, work, our vehicles, etc.

We want personal belongings that are cheap and will make our lives relaxing and hassle-free. Yet, when they catch fire they can produce toxic gas. Consumer goods are produced utilizing cost-saving synthetic materials, therefore making fires extremely dangerous for today's firefighter. In turn, cancer diagnoses are driven up, researchers believe by items made from a variety of burning chemicals.

Let's go back to look over the past 50 years and think about what type of materials were used back then versus today. Back then, real lumber, steel, and glass were used. Today, it's mostly plastics, foams, and coatings in which every single one of these creates a toxic soup of carcinogens when they burn. Fire experts state that synthetic materials create hundreds of times more smoke than organic ones. Your television, your child's doll, the plastic food wrap you use, your sofa, bed mattress...every one of them can produce toxic fumes while burning!

Everyone in your family is subject to these household chemicals every day, but the real threat comes when they catch fire. When fire retardants, as well as other substances, heat up and begin to burn, they produce reactive oxygen species. A build up of reactive oxygen species in cells may cause damage to DNA and may cause cell death.

As a firefighter, you protect yourself from the toxic heat and smoke by donning your turnout gear and SCBA, but keep in mind the coat as well as trousers do not secure with each other. So every active fire that you work, smoke and fumes will ease its way up under the coat from your waistline clinging to the underlayer of your clothing, any exposed skin, neck, and potentially reaching to the top of your head. Also, quit pulling those protective hoods down and around your neck! A chief recently told me that five of his firefighters are now diagnosed with thyroid cancer!

On every fire call, we wear that cumbersome SCBA to protect our respiratory system, yet we think nothing about removing the mask throughout the "overhaul" period. Yes, the fire is mostly out but the embers are still smoldering, and we fall short to understand that this is not only the most hazardous time throughout the fire call, but the most unsafe time too.

Let's all come to a consensus and agree if we intend to endure the occupation as a firefighter, we must start now and stick to the standard operating guidelines that are developed to protect us.

Develop a mindset that after every active fire, you will perform a gross decontamination of your gear and equipment while still on-scene. You will not openly transport your soiled gear in the apparatus cab or the trunk of your personal vehicle. You will wash (machine wash) your turnout gear, and you will shower your body immediately!

It really comes down to the fact that, "tough-guy" photo of a firefighter with smeared soot on his face, is not so macho anymore. In today's reality it is a hazardous one.

Don't be a soot face. Stay clean, stay healthy, and stay safe!

Gene Cobb is the current CEO (Chief Encouragement Officer) at the Volunteer Firefighter Alliance. His background spans over 35 years in fire/rescue. Gene has extensive experience in consulting on loss prevention and risk management and has presented personal safety and wellness programs to a variety of fire departments and corporations across the country. Today, he is on a mission to change the culture and reduce the number of yearly firefighter deaths due to cancer through the Firefighter Cancer Alliance, a program service of the Volunteer Firefighter Alliance. Gene is determined to save the lives of those that risk everything to save ours!



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.

Keep The Requests Coming!

The Volunteer Firefighter Alliance has shipped out 655,266 requested education booklets to 46 states in 2019. These booklets include: fire prevention safety activity booklets, cancer prevention booklets, and senior fire safety tips booklets. Visit us at www.freefireprevention.com for your free material.

Increase Retention Rates in 2020

Good recruitment and retention practices are necessary to secure the future of the volunteer fire and emergency services. Here are some methods and activities to improve department retention:

- Provide flexibility and innovation in training methods, such as through online training or creative training schedules.
- Build camaraderie through training and other department activities.
- Create and practice a culture of inclusion within the department to ensure that all department members are treated fairly and respectfully.
- Build strong leaders and have a succession plan in place to provide room for growth and learning for younger recruits.
- Enable volunteers to have a voice. Survey members to identify ongoing improvements.
- Offer reasonable and flexible time requirements to activities and calls.

Only with effective recruitment and retention practices are fire departments able to maintain adequate staffing levels to respond safely and effectively to calls.

FireWives Need To Share More

By Val Shelby

Looking back 20 years ago to when my husband first joined the fire dept, it's easy to see things done right and wrong. His application for our local dept was last minute and EMT class started quickly. Like so many things in our life, there was no chance to get ready and plan, we just jumped in. I had this strange, strong opinion that in order for this to work for us, he had to build a play structure in our backyard. I'm sure you are wondering what in the world the two have in common?

We had no idea what we were getting into when he turned in that application. We just knew he'd always wanted to be a firefighter and this was a step to doing it. Then, I heard about the class time and as all of you know, class time on top of a job, on top of a long commute, WOWZA. My head started spinning as soon as I heard the hours. I wanted the backyard to be a place for the kids to play because something in me said this would help keep me sane.

I was so right! That swing set was my life saver through EMT & Fire 1 classes when I was alone with the kids. It continued to be a sanity saver through the younger years as other kids were happy to come over and play at our house which meant if my firefighter was home we'd technically be spending time as a family.

It's the things I thought were silly back then that I and other wives want to share with the next generations coming into the fire service. While an odd idea at the time, it ended up helping so much. We older wives didn't have the internet and many of our departments weren't close or supportive. Goodness, many departments are just now recognizing how critical it is for firefighters to have supportive families and the role we wives play in all of this. We did it back then on our own and trudged through with many a tear as we learned to navigate the fire life.

Sharing information and their experience is my goal in the Wife Behind the Fire community of over 1,300. Each of us has gone through so much over the years and sharing that knowledge is key to making positive changes in every one of our communities. The wives getting through a first year are a wealth of information for the wives that their spouse just joined a week ago. Everyone has experiences they can pay forward and our community has been built on that concept.

I'm excited to have the *Fireside Chats* on the site again which is a collaborative blog post. I ask a question and we get answers from multiple wives as to how they have dealt with the issue or how their department works on certain topics. It brings multiple point of views so you can pick out answers that could work for your situation at any time. There's comfort in knowing you are not going this alone.

Our community is made up of volunteer and career firefighter wives. It's made up of officers and rookies wives. We have retired wives and widows. Each bringing their unique story and experiences to share with the rest of us.

Because sharing is so important to me, I've begun to use my gift of gab and my experience running online events to good use. Last October, I ran the first online FireWife Summit and we discussed mental health. In April, I will be running another Summit on cancer prevention and resources. Thanks to sponsors, I am able to keep these Summits free for all to attend. Over the 11 years online in the fire community, I've made a lot of contacts and now it's time to get as many working together and connected as possible.

It doesn't matter how long you've been in the fire life, something new will pop up. You are never alone and know that there is always someone that has gone through the same thing. Together, we'll make changes.

Val Selby runs WifeBehindtheFire.com. She has been talking to and helping fire wives through tough situations online since 2008 with honest answers. Val's goal is to keep FireWives focused on being mentally and emotionally healthy so they can be that safe spot for their firefighters at home.

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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**](http://www.supportvfa.org)