

8 habits that expose firefighters to cancer-causing toxins

Firefighters can reduce their risk of cancer by changing some of their behaviors

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According to the nonprofit [Firefighter Cancer Support Network](#) (FCSN), firefighters suffer disproportionately from cancer generally but especially from certain forms of the disease, such as testicular cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, multiple myeloma, and possibly breast cancer.

There are several behaviors that may increase an individual firefighter's risk for cancer. Firefighters may increase their risk to toxic exposure in a number of avoidable ways.

1. NOT WEARING SCBA MASKS

Sometimes firefighters don't wear full SCBA when they should, and often they remove masks too soon during firefighting or overhaul.

Failure to use other PPE, such as hoods, can also increase risk.

2. PROUDLY WEARING DIRTY GEAR

Having the dirtiest gear on the crew was once a badge of honor and a symbol of experience and expertise for officers and trainers.

Some firefighters still cling to this idea, setting a bad example for newer firefighters and perpetuating unhealthy habits over time.

3. HAVING ONLY ONE SET OF TURNOUT GEAR

Yes, it is more costly to provide two sets of gear per person. But when you only have one, thoroughly washing that gear in a timely manner is challenging.

4. BRINGING DIRTY TURNOUT GEAR TO SLEEPING QUARTERS

This was once a normal practice—of course you had your gear next to your bed for the quickest response at night.

Now some departments forbid bringing gear into any of the station living areas. But for some departments, having fire turnout gear in living spaces still is a common practice.

5. CARRYING GEAR IN PERSONAL VEHICLES

For many firefighters, including volunteers and those without a permanent station assignment, carrying turnout gear in their own vehicles is a necessity.

But when that gear is contaminated with toxic products of combustion, those toxins will be off-gassing into that vehicle, affecting not only the firefighters but their families and friends as well. Transporting (not storing) gear in an airtight container can help.

6. EXPOSURE TO DIESEL EXHAUST

Diesel is a known carcinogen. Before exhaust removal systems were developed, fire stations and everything in them were covered in diesel exhaust.

And some still are—because exhaust systems are nonexistent, not properly installed, or not consistently used. As a result, turnout gear stored in apparatus bays may be exposed to diesel residue and other chemicals.



Past and current studies show firefighters are exposed to cancer-causing toxins and are at risk. (Image Pixabay)

7. LESS THAN CLEAN RIGS

Many fire departments pride themselves on having spotless fire trucks, at least on the outside. But, what about on the inside?

Contaminated bunker gear will in turn contaminate the interior of fire apparatus. If those spaces are not routinely cleaned, this can become another source of exposure over time.

8. DELAYS IN PERSONAL HYGIENE POST-INCIDENT

Firefighters need to shower and clean their gear as soon as possible after a fire.

Many firefighters don't take care of themselves when it comes to personal hygiene post-incident because they are obligated to complete other tasks first, because there is a lack of shower facilities to accommodate everyone, or sometimes because they just don't want to bother. But the more time soot, ash, diesel, chemicals and other toxins stay on the skin increases the greater the risk of cancer for that individual.

Cancer is a complex disease, and no one understands fully why some individuals are victims of the disease while others are not. But one thing is certain: Exposure to specific types of toxins, many of which are common in a firefighter's working life, will increase the risk of falling prey to some form of cancer over time.

Exposure can be reduced with proper use of PPE, updated station safety systems, and a commitment to personal safety and hygiene. See [FCSN's 11 recommended actions](#) for more details. FCSN also provides cancer-prevention training for fire departments free of charge. Go [here](#) for more information.