

## Cancer in the Fire Service: Fact or Fiction?

Mar 9, 2010 3:51 PM

By Mary Rose Roberts

There has been some controversy over whether there is a connection between firefighting and incidents of cancer. Mike Dubron, founder of the Firefighter Cancer Support Network, addresses the current climate surrounding cancer claims, including ways U.S. firefighters are vulnerable to cancer, types of perilous building materials and toxic chemicals and how to best reduce incidents.

### **There are pundits who claim there is little to no connection between cancer and the fire service. What is your opinion?**

I absolutely believe that there is a connection — myself being a cancer survivor, which opened up my eyes to this disease and the fire service. After my diagnose of cancer, I took a look around and I think the studies have absolutely shown, and proven, that there is a link between cancer and firefighting. In this line of duty we are exposed to carcinogens. Yet recently, the TriData report that came out through the National League of Cities contradicted some of the assertions that there was a link between cancer and firefighting.

### **What statistics do you have that support your claim?**

There are a ton of studies out there. Grace LeMasters' report from the University of Cincinnati has been one of the most widely reviewed [medical] analysis of 32 different studies. It shows a direct correlation between the different types of cancers and firefighting. That is available along with many other studies through our Web site and available through the IAFF and the IAFC.

### **In what ways are U.S. firefighters vulnerable to cancer?**

It's through the numerous exposures we have, whether it's on the fireground or during day-to-day operations. You can look at a daily activity at the firehouse — being exposed to the benzene from diesel exhaust is an exposure that is very common. And then, of course, when we go into firefighting, whether it's structural firefighting in various degrees — whether at a dumpster or at a commercial fire — we are being exposed to the elements — regardless of the type of personal safety equipment or protective equipment we have. Nothing can be a 100% to eliminate those exposures.

### **What materials or toxic chemicals are firefighters exposed to that can lead to cancer?**

There are tons of different materials out there from unknowns to known, whether it's asbestos or benzene, and a list of chemicals that are known to be carcinogens — from emissions to different products. It just goes on. There is a list of known carcinogens that is also available on our Web site, from different chemicals that can found in aesthetic materials in structures, such as carpet and couches, sulfuric acids, all kinds that are related to different types of cancers. This information was found through the Department of Health and Human Services. It is a public document that evaluates different carcinogens that are known to humans that can be found in various structures and various firefighting environments.

### **What needs to be done to reduce such incidents of cancer?**

There are several key aspects that we need to do. One of them obviously is to wear the most up-to-date protective equipment available to us, including breathing apparatus and turnout or bunker gear. It is also important to maintain that gear. Often in the fire service — the dirtier the gear, the more experience you show as a firefighter. But now we understand that maintaining that gear and keeping that gear clean is very important.

Also, we see fire departments participating in having diesel exhaust removal systems or removal systems attached to the apparatus itself. It also is very important to participate in wellness exams, such as the Wellness Fitness Initiative, which is endorsed by the IAFF and the IAFC. Firefighters can go and get an annual wellness exam, and through that exam, if they are diagnosed with cancer, they are detected at an early stage and obviously increasing your chance of a cure.

### **Listen to it on the Web**

<http://firechief.com/podcast/cancer-fire-service-fcsn-dubron/>

### **Related links:**

<http://healthnews.uc.edu/news/?/3750>