TuSalud

Los Angeles Firefighters Face Increased Cancer Risk

January is Firefighter Cancer Awareness Month. These heroes inhale carcinogenic substances and often use a cancer-causing foam.

January 15, 2025 By Laura Schmidt

Many of the firefighters working to contain the Eaton and Palisades fires in Los Angeles will likely battle another dangerous foe in their lifetime: cancer.

Cancer is the most dangerous health threat firefighters face; indeed, it's the top cause of death among these heroes, according to E&E News by Politico.

From 2002 to 2019, 66% of line-of-duty deaths among firefighters were caused by cancer, according to the Firefighter Cancer Support Network. Experts say pinpointing the exact cause of cancer is difficult because firefighters are exposed to many carcinogenic agents.

January is Firefighter Cancer Awareness Month, which urges firefighters and their loved ones to learn about their cancer risks and take preventive measures when possible.

Firefighters are twice as likely to develop certain cancers compared with the general population, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Studies have shown that firefighters have an increased risk of colon, prostate and testicular cancer, mesothelioma, multiple myeloma, leukemia and more.

Firefighters are commonly exposed to asbestos and other carcinogens found in soot and smoke from modern buildings containing synthetic and plastic materials.

What's more, they often use a firefighting foam to put out high-intensity fires. This foam contains toxic chemicals known as perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, which can build up in the body over time and cause bladder cancer, breast cancer, leukemia, liver cancer and

other serious conditions.

Firefighters can reduce their cancer risk by educating themselves on respiratory protection and following proper cancer prevention protocols.

For example, firefighters should clean their suits and equipment upon returning to the station to remove toxic chemicals. Firefighters are also encouraged to routinely screen for cancers because early detection leads to better outcomes and improved survival rates.

This week, the Association of Cancer Care Centers launched a fundraising initiative to support the Firefighter Cancer Support Network. The association will match donations up to $10,000.

Donations can be made here.

According to a news release, donations will support:

- Enhanced cancer prevention training programs;
- Expanded support services for affected firefighters and their families;
- Advanced research initiatives on protective measures and early detection;
- Implementation of additional mentor training programs.

In related news, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) operates a National Firefighter Registry for Cancer (NFR) online enrollment system. The voluntary database is the largest effort undertaken nationally to advance an understanding of cancer in the fire service.

NIOSH director John Howard, MD, said: "I encourage all firefighters across America to join the NFR for Cancer—the more firefighters who join the NFR, the more researchers can learn about cancer arising from firefighting and how to prevent it. Firefighters are vital to the safety of our communities, and their enrollment in the NFR for cancer can help protect them and the next generation of firefighters from cancer."

To read more, click #Cancer Risk. There, you'll see headlines such as "Alcohol is a Leading Cause of Cancer, But Will the Public Heed a New Warning?" "EPA Bans Two Common Chemicals That Cause Cancer" and "Reduce Your Cancer Risk Factors."

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