

PREVENTING FIREFIGHTER CANCER: 10 TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FIRE SERVICE CANCER SYMPOSIUM

By Jennifer Brust

Last month, fire service leaders came together for what could arguably be called the most important conference of the year. And yet, it had no hands-on training, no huge exhibit area where companies advertised their wares, and there were no bands marching through the streets.

But what was discussed over those two days has the potential to save many firefighter lives.

If you haven't guessed it already, the event was the Fire Service Occupational Cancer Symposium in Phoenix. Sponsored by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, the event featured dedicated men and women from the fire service, academia and allied organizations sharing their expertise, research and personal stories for the common mission to reduce firefighter risk of occupational cancer.

As one of over 500 attendees, I was anxious to hear the latest research and how it could be applied to create definitive risk-reduction solutions. What did I learn? There is tremendous research going on to get to some solutions, but there are a lot of unknowns and no silver bullet. There are, however, real actions that firefighters and fire departments can take now to reduce their risk.

10 Key Takeaways

1. Don't use tobacco—it's still the #1 risk factor.
2. Stay on air through overhaul (and put fire inspectors on air).
3. Everyone in the hazard zone must be on air (think engineers). Research shows everyone in the hazard zone is exposed, not just the interior attack team.
4. Rehab all crews. [One research study](#) demonstrated that the roof ventilation team had higher core body temperature increase than the interior attack team.
5. Wash your hands before eating or using the bathroom on scene and shower after a fire.
6. Wash your PPE, including hoods, helmets, boots and gloves.
7. Keep anything from the fire scene out of the cab.
8. Get an annual physical.
9. Preplan for the day someone walks in with a diagnosis. Get connected with the [Firefighter Cancer Support Network](#).
10. Establish cancer prevention policies and procedures. Communicate the expectations and enforce them in training, on the fireground and at the station.

In the next few years, as more research is conducted, we can expect to see more information regarding firefighter cancer statistics, PPE cleaning procedures, effectiveness of intervention methods and more. Just as important is the need for real compassion and support for those affected with cancer. The conference highlighted ways departments can provide support and resources that individuals, families and departments can draw on.

Firefighting is a job that calls the brave and big-hearted. Now that bravery is needed to be a change agent in your organization. Have the courage to stay on air and be proud of a clean helmet. It's not just about making it home at the end of a shift—it's about making it home at the end of your career.

For more information about the research that was presented at the NFFF Fire Service Occupational Cancer Symposium, feel free to [contact me](#) or the [NFFF](#).

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Sources

Illinois Fire Service Institute, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, UL Fire Science Research Institute. (September 2017). [10 Considerations Related to Cardiovascular and Chemical Exposure Risks](#). *Firehouse Magazine*. 2017;42(9):supplement.