



# Firefighter Cancer: Some Suggestions For Minimizing the Risk

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As a fire guy, I didn't necessarily think at the age of 35, I would get diagnosed with cancer. Well I did. It started out as playing with a superficial lump in my left armpit at the fire house, sort of eliciting some sort of shock response from my peers. That was until my medic partner encouraged me to have it looked at. I decided to take his advice, and have it looked at by my doctor. While discussing some possibilities for the lump in my armpit, she mentions lymphoma. I looked at her and said, "That sounds like cancer." To which she replied to the affirmative.

I was immediately scheduled for surgery and with my initial physical exam with the surgeon, he revealed to me an even larger lump, deeper in my armpit. When it was all said and done, and the lymph nodes were sent to pathology, it came back confirmed, Hodgkin's lymphoma.

The following months included an infection, getting poisoned with aggressive chemotherapy, radiation, another surgery, and a barrage of different scans and blood work. Oh yeah, I also managed to break my arm two days before radiation. I was off for 5 months from the job I loved, while being held up by my wife, kids, and my fire family. I am proud to say that after 8 years, I am cancer free and the doctors consider me "cured" from "The Hodge."

My mission now, through Code 3 for a Cure and any other venue, is to get the word out on the things we can do daily to minimize our occupational exposure as firefighters. I will list some head's up stuff that take little effort, no cost, and can perhaps make a difference. Remember that this is simply my opinion based on 8 years of survivorship.

## KEYS TO LESSEN POTENTIAL FOR CANCER:

1. Shower/Steam after fire calls. A lot of data is coming out regarding trans-dermal exposure. Whether you have a steamer, sauna, or even a hot shower, get in there after every fire and open up those pores so you can purge the toxins.
2. Bay blow by returning to quarters. A lot of fire departments don't have a smoke evacuation system in their bay, or maybe they have these devices on their rig that burn the particulate, giving the firefighter the illusion of protection. I decided that when we return to quarters, we would open both front and back bay doors as we pull in, turn off the rig and wait a few seconds while the diesel exhaust is allowed to blow through the bay.
3. Hot Wash, literally after fire calls, could be handled before or after debriefing incidents, while on scene. Pull the booster and have an on scene hasty decon, before you leave. Then store the still contaminated PPE in an area separate from the cab, so to not expose you with the off gassing of materials still in the PPE.
4. Leave PPE in the bay. This should be a no-brainer but we still see firefighters wear their turnouts in the station, or have them by their bed while all night the fumes from the imbedded carcinogens are allowed to fill the room and expose the sleeping firefighter.
5. Launder your PPE frequently, including your helmet, Nomex hood, internal harness, suspension, and your SCBA mask. Follow the manufacturers' specifications as well as the directions from NIOSH, NFPA, and OSHA. Then leave it at the station and don't bring dirty PPE home to expose your family, or leave contaminated PPE in your car.

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## Firefighter Cancer: Some Suggestions for Minimizing the Risk (cont.)

6. 4 gas monitor is no indication of safety as it relates to carcinogen exposure on the fire scene.
7. Rotate crews for interior and down wind operations, wear your SCBA, the air is free and your family deserves it. Do this from entry through overhaul.
8. If your fire department's haz mat team has one, call for mass spectrometer on large fires. Who knows, you may get it. This will give you a better picture of toxins on the fire scene.
9. Squash the side job, if feasible. You need good recuperation and time to spend with loved ones. That's why the time off was built in, to get you back to combat readiness and allow your body to recover. Cancer loves firefighter fatigue and a taxed immune system.
10. Eat the best you can, paleo model is beneficial, lots of veggies. Try to stay away from processed food and sugar, cancer loves that stuff too.
11. Work out, hydrate, sleep, pray, meditate, etc...
12. Get your annual physicals, including cancer screening.

That's all for now. This is not a fully inclusive list, but a start on what we can do to try and fight against this ever-looming threat. Do what you can and stay in the fight. It is a fight worth fighting. Thanks for listening.

Sincerely,

Bob Silverthorne, SLCFD

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*Bob Silverthorne is a Fire Captain and 19 year veteran of the Salt Lake City Fire Department.*

Code 3 for a Cure (C3FAC) is a national nonprofit 501(c)3 public charity which addresses cancer in the fire service, in part by promoting the reality of cancer as an occupational hazard of firefighting and providing financial assistance to firefighters who are battling the disease.

C3FAC bulletins are intended as a tool to promote awareness about various topics relating to cancer prevention in the fire service. If you have a question you would like addressed, a subject you would like covered, or an article you would like to submit for a future bulletin, please write to: [firefighters@c3fac.org](mailto:firefighters@c3fac.org).

Note: C3FAC bulletins are not intended to alter or replace industry standards, nor to replace guidance from a qualified expert. If you have a specific situation that needs to be addressed, please seek advice from the appropriate authority or expert.