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Spot and monitor potential cancer symptoms

Why and how to track possible cancer symptoms

Why it matters

Firefighters are used to pushing through discomfort, sleep disruption, and strain.

Because many firefighters appear healthy and fit, symptoms can be easy for both firefighters and doctors to overlook.

Many symptoms are caused by common conditions. The list on the next page is **not for self-diagnosis** – it's a reminder to check for and document ongoing changes.

How to use this tool

1. Reference the list of possible cancer symptoms.
2. Use prompts below to document your symptoms, including dates. If symptoms last longer than a few weeks or recur, contact your doctor.
3. Use your notes to help describe your symptoms.

Track symptoms that:

- Are new or different from your normal
- Don't go away or come back

Document:

- What changed: what feels different from your normal
- When & how often: when it started and how often it happens
- What affects it: anything that makes it better or worse
- Impact: how noticeable or worrying it feels (1–5)

How this helps at a doctor visit:

- Gives you clear examples and dates to share so that you can be specific about what "feels off"

Ask your doctor:

"Based on my normal, what changes would make this more concerning?"

Tips

Appointments

If your symptoms feel urgent or concerning, many health systems offer advice lines where you can get guidance and help finding an earlier appointment.

Use your computer or smartphone to document:

- Try a calendar, notes or voice recording app.
- Set reminders to check in on your symptoms.
- Example: If you have a symptom now, set a reminder in 3 weeks.

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Symptoms to track - See previous page for how to use this information

Unusual lumps, swelling, or thickening

- New or growing lumps in the neck, armpits, groin, chest, or testicles
- Swelling that doesn't go down after a few weeks
- Areas that feel firmer than surrounding areas

Lumps are often blamed on muscle strain, gear pressure, or minor injuries – but lumps that persist or grow deserve a check.

Moles and other skin changes

- New spots or changes in size, shape, or color
- Dark, red, or scaly patches; areas that bruise easily
- Sores that don't heal (face, neck, hands, scalp)
- Ongoing itching, burning, or thickening

Fire exposure and PPE friction can mask skin changes – persistent or evolving spots matter

Unexplained fatigue or night sweats

- Feeling unusually exhausted despite rest days
- Needing more recovery time than usual
- that interferes with workouts, calls, or daily tasks
- Fevers or chills without a clear reason
- Night sweats that are new, frequent, or drench sheets/clothes

Don't ignore fatigue that feels different than expected. Fevers or night sweats that keep happening off-shift or without infection deserve a check.

Pain that doesn't improve

- Ongoing pain not tied to a specific injury
- Pain that worsens over time or wakes you at night

Aches are part of the job – but pain that doesn't respond to rest, rehab, or time is different.

Persistent cough, hoarseness, or breathing changes

- Cough or hoarseness that lasts weeks
- Shortness of breath that's new or worsening

Smoke exposure and seasonal illness are common – symptoms that don't resolve or keep returning matter.

Changes in bowel or bladder habits

- Blood in stool
- Ongoing constipation or diarrhea
- Changes in stool shape, consistency, or color
- Changes in urine color
- Increased urgency or difficulty urinating

Hydration and schedules affect digestion, but persistent changes aren't just a shift issue.

Unusual bleeding or bruising

- Frequent or unexplained bruises
- Bleeding gums or blood in urine/stool

Minor injuries are common – but bruising or bleeding without clear trauma that keeps happening should be checked.

Unexplained weight loss or appetite changes

- Losing weight without trying
- Feeling full quickly or losing interest in food
- Ongoing nausea or appetite changes

Busy shifts and missed meals happen – but continued weight loss or appetite changes off-shift should be checked.

Vision changes

- Blurred or double vision
- New trouble focusing, reading, or seeing at night
- Vision loss in any part of the visual field
- Flashes, floaters, or shadowed vision
- Persistent eye pain or pressure

Smoke and eye irritation are common – symptoms that persist off-shift or keep recurring should be checked.