Considerations for clinicians caring for firefighters

For clinicians: Caring for firefighters

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Clinical approaches to supporting firefighters may include:

- Eliciting and validating patient concerns
- Encouraging discussion of symptoms, patterns over time, and occupational exposures
- Clearly explaining both the benefits and risks of screening

High levels of fitness may mask early signs of disease

- Many firefighters maintain strength, endurance, and cardiovascular fitness well into midlife.
- This visible fitness can obscure early disease signals.

Traditional clinical cues may be subtler or delayed

- Symptoms are often attributed to training, shift work, or job-related rather than illness.
- Early warning signs may not fit typical expectations.

Clinical assessment may need a different lens

- Greater attention to changes from an individual's baseline
- Consideration of occupational exposures
- Tracking symptom patterns over time

Firefighter occupational exposures

- Repeated smoke exposure
- Extended exposure to wildland fires
- Chemical or industrial fires
- Significant sun exposure
- Shift work & chronic sleep disruption
- Diesel exhaust: fumes and particulates
- Elevated levels of stress

Firefighter health risks

- Elevated cancer incidence and mortality
- Higher rates of cardiovascular disease
- Increased risk of respiratory conditions
- Mental health concerns including chronic stress, repeated trauma exposure, alcohol and substance use, depression and suicidal ideation

For more information: First Responder Center for Excellence Guides
firstrespondercenter.org/resource-hub/firefighter-physicals/

Sources

1. International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Occupational exposure as a firefighter. IARC Monographs, 2023. https://publications.iarc.who.int/download/Volume132.pdf.
2. Jahnke S, et al. Firefighter cancer incidence and mortality: An updated meta-analysis. Asian Pac J Cancer Prev. 2024. https://doi.org/10.31557/APJCP.2024.25.3.801.