



The Risk

Firefighters face a wide variety of hazards while carrying out the occupational requirement of saving lives and reducing property damage. Firefighters are routinely exposed to burning chemicals and other toxins in the course of protecting the lives and property of fellow citizens.

It is fact that even with the best respiratory practices and protective equipment exposures will continue to occur due to absorption through the skin once a firefighter has become soaked during fire suppression activities. The concentration of chemicals in today's materials is much higher than in the past due to the increased use of composite materials.

Epidemiological, medical, and scientific studies conclusively demonstrate an increased rate of diseases such as cancer in the firefighter population versus the general population. These studies show a statistically significant increase that cannot be explained by chance alone. The medical evidence shows that firefighters have anywhere from two to four times the risk of cancers compared to the general population. If you factor in the healthy worker effect, which means firefighters are a healthier study group compared to the general public, the rates are even higher.

Once a Leader - Ontario is Now Lagging Behind

In May, 2007, the Ontario Government passed Bill 221. This legislation permitted the Minister of Labour to create or amend regulations that outline occupational diseases presumed to have been contracted by professional, part-time, volunteer and forest firefighters. In June, 2007, regulations were enacted that covered eight cancers and heart disease retroactive to January 1, 1960.

In 2014, the Ontario government amended the Firefighter Regulation under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act to add six cancers to the list of presumptive diseases making Ontario among the leaders in this area, and Ontario's firefighters among the best protected in Canada. (Cancers added: multiple myeloma, testicular, breast, prostate, lung and skin cancer.)

Several jurisdictions have followed Ontario's lead and have passed legislation recognizing that firefighters are at greater risk as a result of their occupation. In 2021, the Yukon territory was the first to add Pancreatic and Thyroid cancers to their presumptive coverate. Manitoba quickly followed their lead. In July 2022, Nova Scotia will add expand their coverage from 6 to 19 cancers including Pancreatic and Thyroid. Ontario needs to follow these leaders - adding Pancreatic and Thyroid cancers to the list of presumptive cancers - and maintain its position as a leader thereby ensuring that firefighters have greater access to healthcare and compensation.

The Reasoning

Unlike other occupational groups, firefighters cannot refuse to work under dangerous and hazardous conditions. As such, firefighters are exposed to a toxic soup of potential carcinogens. From smoke, firefighters are exposed to benzene; hydrogen chloride; polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs); chlorine; acrolein; formaldehyde; acetic acid; formic acid; oxides of nitrogen; phosgene; hydrogen cyanide; carbon monoxide; dioxins; polychlorinated biphenyls and acetaldehyde. From building materials, firefighters are exposed to asbestos and lead. Diesel exhaust exposures include polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs); benzo(a)pyrene; sulfur oxides. From firefighting equipment, firefighters are exposed to carbon tetrachloride and asbestos.

Firefighters are never exposed to one chemical compound alone. The health hazards of multiple carcinogenic exposures are greater than the sum of individual exposures. The proliferation of synthetic substances in the marketplace means that firefighters are increasingly exposed to new and multiple hazards and increased exposure means a higher likelihood of contracting cancer.

There are over 70 million different chemical combinations that firefighters can be exposed to over the course of their lives.

Our Ask

We ask you to support the addition of Thyroid and Pancreatic cancers to Ontario's presumptive coverage and demand that professional firefighters (and their families) have fair treatment should they become ill, disabled, or die as a result of their occupation.