

Cancer Risk Twice as High for Firefighters

PATRICK GALLAHUE and LEELA de KRETZER

The New York Post

New York's Bravest are fighting more than just fires, according to a new study of 110,000 of firefighters worldwide that found they face up to twice the risk of dying from certain types of cancer. After analyzing statistics on 20 different kinds of cancer, University of Cincinnati researchers revealed that firefighters developed 10 of those deadly diseases more frequently than any other type of worker.

The most virulent was testicular cancer, which the study found was twice as likely to affect firemen. Firefighters also faced a 53 per cent greater chance of contracting multiple myeloma, a deadly cancer that attacks bone marrow. Non-Hodgkin lymphoma and prostate cancer had also occurred at significantly higher rates in firemen than in other workers.

The analysis, which included FDNY members in its sample, is to be published Monday in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Head researcher Grace LeMasters said the three-year study was prompted by research on 9/11 cancer risks. **"Firefighters are exposed to numerous cancer-causing substances," LeMasters said. "I think obviously they have not got enough protection from that exposure." LeMasters, with the university's Department of Environmental Health, said protective gear for firefighters was not designed to safeguard them from toxic chemicals. "We feel that the protective gear that protects them from acute exposure, such as heat and carbon monoxide, doesn't protect them from the chemical residues that cause cancer," she said. When firefighters are sweaty on the job, she said, "the pores in their skin are open and are more likely to absorb chemical residue."** LeMasters suggested a lightweight uniform be designed that would not allow chemical residues to penetrate the skin. "Nurses wear latex gloves. I am not recommending they wear latex because it's too hot, but we need some advanced material that will allow them not to get hot, but also protect them from these chemicals," she said. "We do have protective gear for soldiers and NASA astronauts, and I think if we make it a priority we can protect these firefighters. It just has not been a priority, even though firefighters are public servants and risk their lives."

The study came as little surprise to local Uniformed Firefighters Association president Steve Cassidy. "It's an unbelievably dangerous job," he said. "The exposure the city's firefighters suffer in their daily workload is higher than anywhere in the country." But Cassidy said the belief that improved equipment could protect firefighters from cancer was naive. FDNY spokesman Frank Gribbon said: "Never have firefighters been so personally protected with the gear they have. Bunker gear, boots, and masks - New York City firefighters, we believe, have the best equipment available."

Firefighters face more risk than other workers in developing these cancers:

Cancer Type: Increased risk

- * Testicular cancer: 102%
- * Multiple myeloma: 53%
- * Non-Hodgkin lymphoma: 51%
- * Skin cancer: 39%
- * Brain cancer: 32%
- * Prostate cancer: 28%
- * Stomach cancer: 22%
- * Colon cancer: 21%