

FIREFIGHTING AND PANCREATIC CANCER

What you need to know

This year, an estimated 6,900 Canadians will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. While we are still trying to understand the causes of this disease, there are several known risk factors. Mounting scientific evidence shows a connection between firefighting and pancreatic cancer due to carcinogen exposure, but it has yet to be listed as a presumptive cancer for firefighters across the country.

Read on to learn what to watch for, which other cancers are also risks for firefighters, and how you can stay vigilant about this aggressive disease.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer are usually vague, which makes it one of the most challenging diseases to catch in the early stages. If you experience one or more of these symptoms, speak to your doctor:

- Persistent pain in the upper abdomen or back
- Jaundice
- Changes in stool colour
- Overall skin itch
- Late-onset diabetes
- Loss of appetite or unintended weight loss
- Fatigue
- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhea and constipation

COMMON MISDIAGNOSES

There is no screening test for pancreatic cancer and symptoms can resemble other ailments, making it easily misdiagnosed. Below are some of the common misdiagnoses for pancreatic cancer to be aware of:

- Gallbladder disease or gallstones
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Peptic ulcer
- Diverticulitis
- Muscular pain
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (heartburn and reflux)

OTHER CANCER RISKS

In addition to pancreatic, growing evidence indicates that firefighting has links to the following cancers. The cancers listed below are almost universally accepted as related to firefighting exposures and workers compensation legislation in many jurisdictions reflects this. Listen to your body and be vigilant of any changes in your health.

- Colorectal
- Bladder
- Brain
- Kidney
- Leukemia
- Esophageal
- Lung cancer
- Testicular
- Thyroid
- Ureter
- Breast
- Multiple myeloma
- Prostate
- Skin
- Ovarian
- Cervical
- Penile
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Always wear protective equipment properly and speak to station leadership about any concerns with your gear.
- Ensure your doctor knows about the risk factors associated with your profession and that pancreatic cancer is something that should be watched for.
- Stay vigilant of the signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer and speak to your doctor if symptoms persist or feel unusual. A timely diagnosis is a patient's greatest chance of survival.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PANCREATIC CANCER RISK

Acknowledgment of pancreatic cancer as a workplace risk for firefighters differs in most provinces and territories. As it is up to each province and territory to determine which cancers are considered presumptive, there are varying limitations and entitlements when a firefighter is diagnosed or dies from pancreatic cancer. We are working with representatives across the country to advocate for pancreatic and other cancers to be recognized as a risk for firefighters. To understand how this may impact you, speak to your Firefighters' Association representative.

LEARN MORE

We're here to help. Learn more at pancreaticcancercanada.ca or contact us with any questions.

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