Asbestos Awareness – Firefighters Stats and Facts

FACTS

1. Firefighters are usually exposed to asbestos from burning buildings. However, they can also be exposed from their protective gear, in their fire stations, or if asbestos fibers linger in the air after a fire is put out.

2. Firefighters face the highest risk of exposure when trying to put out fires in older buildings made with asbestos-containing products. Modern-day firefighters may not know whether a building contains asbestos, so they must use respiratory protection to avoid exposure.

3. Building parts that contained asbestos include:

- Boiler systems
- Electrical wiring
- Insulation
- Pipes
- Shingles
- Tiles

4. Firefighters who are exposed to asbestos during firefighting risk injuries to:

- Mesothelioma
- Lung cancer
- Asbestosis
- Pleural plaques
- Pleural effusion

5. Protective measures such as wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) can help to minimize the risk of exposure to asbestos-related disease.

STATS

- Globally, an estimated 300 people die each day and mining, and use of asbestos continues.
- The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that firefighters face a 9 % increase in cancer diagnoses and a 14 % increase in cancer-related deaths, compared to the general U.S. population.
- According to the CDC, asbestosis is responsible for roughly 1,300 firefighter deaths per year.
- Between 8,500 and 10,600 firefighter deaths per year result from asbestos-related lung cancer.
- Asbestos-related illnesses affecting firefighters is mesothelioma and is often found in advanced, less treatable stages. Mesothelioma accounts for roughly 3,300 cases annually in firefighters.
- Firefighters still risk asbestos exposure today when working around older buildings. In May of 2021, up to 115 firefighters were possibly exposed to asbestos while putting out a warehouse fire in Austin, Texas.
- Firefighters have a 2.5 times greater risk of developing mesothelioma, a type of cancer associated with asbestos exposure, compared to the general population.
- In a study conducted by the IAFF in 2018, over 60% of firefighters reported encountering asbestos-containing materials on the job, and over 30% reported not receiving any training on how to identify and handle these materials safely.
- The International Association of Fire Fighters reported that cancer was the cause of death in 74% of firefighters who died in 2022.