



5 Must-Know Cardiac Warning Signs

Chief Gary Bowker (Ret)

Stress and over-exertion, which is the number one killer of firefighters, continues to take a deadly toll each year on unsuspecting firefighters in the form of cardiac events during or following emergency operations. This is especially true as summer time temperatures approach.

Most firefighters understand and appreciate the value of pre-planning to identify hazards within our communities and being situationally aware of their surroundings. We gather key pieces of critical information during the best conditions for use under the worst conditions.

This concept can be applied to our own cardiac health to identify and lower the risks associated with cardiac events.

Here are five warning signs that to be aware of. Pre-plan what to do if either you or a member of your crew experiences one or more these symptoms.

1. Become light headed or dizzy with mild or moderate exertion.
2. Quickly become exhausted with mild or moderate exertion.
3. Have shortness of breath.
4. Feel sick or just not feeling or looking right.
5. Have any chest, shoulder, back, left arm pain or numbness.

Mum is not the word

Many firefighters won't say anything if they are not feeling well, so it is imperative that crew members know their own body, and keep a watchful eye on one another. If the firefighter just doesn't look well, talk to him or her, and if

they don't feel well they should be immediately check by qualified medical staff. Period.

Too many firefighters either don't look well or comment that they don't feel well and ignore these symptoms only to die hours later. Keeping well hydrated and going to rehab while working in the summer heat is not enough.

All firefighters should know whether they have a family history of cardiac illness or disease. This is crucial. If you have a family history of heart disease or hypertension your risk factors are significantly increased.

Other long-term preventive measures to improve your overall cardiac health should include: watching your diet and reducing fat intake, lose those extra pounds, exercise regularly, stop smoking and wear your SCBA during overhaul.

Recent studies strongly indicate that carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide gases are present at most all fires in quantities greater than IDLH levels both inside and outside of the structure. These typical fire gases are known to hasten cardiac events. They are also highly suspected of be a contributing factor in the extraordinarily high cancer rates being seen among firefighters. Protocols dealing with this should be codified in your department standard operating procedures.

If you love your crew, train them, and keep an eye on'em.

Side Note: Chief Bowker is a survivor of cardiac heart disease which nearly ended his life on the



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fireground in the summer of 2007 and resulted in his early retirement.