

Double Risk For Firefighters

Study: Heart Problems, Battling Blazes Can Be Deadly Mix

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

Firefighters face a far greater risk of dying of heart problems while battling a blaze than was thought, suggests a large U.S. study that offers more evidence of their need to stay in shape.

The risk of a heart-related death while putting out a fire was up to 100 times higher than the risk during down time, Harvard researchers found, even though fighting fires accounts for only a small percentage of these workers' time.

About 100 firefighters die in the line of duty each year and previous research has shown that nearly half of the deaths are due to heart disease. The vast majority — about 70 percent — of the nation's roughly 1 million firefighters are volunteers.

Experts say diet and exercise should be priorities at the firehouse.

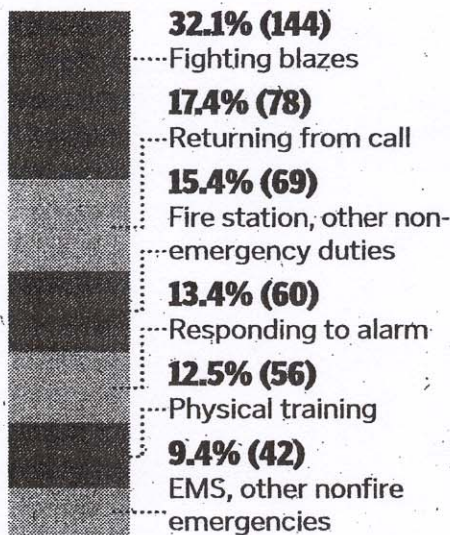
"You may not be able to prevent all these deaths, but to the degree you can prevent some deaths by paying attention to underlying risk factors and better fitness programs, that's the goal," said Dr. Linda Rosenstock, dean of the UCLA School of Public Health, who was not involved in the study.

The study, published in today's New England Journal of Medicine, doesn't address whether firefighters have an overall higher risk of dying from heart disease than the general popula-

Heart-Related Risk

Nearly a third of the 449 heart-related deaths among firefighters occurred while fighting blazes.

Firefighters' duties at time of heart-related deaths, 1994-2004



SOURCE: The New England Journal of Medicine

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Rosenstock said fire departments could do more to improve health by requiring annual physicals and fitness tests. Departments also should have wellness and fitness programs to reduce heart disease risk factors such as obesity and high blood pressure, she said.

Firefighting is a physically demanding job that involves heavy lifting of equipment and exposure to toxic chemicals.

Recruits are generally healthy and physically fit, but their health can decline over time because many firehouses don't require

regular exercise or yearly medical exams. Also, the health requirements are usually less stringent for volunteers, who tend to continue firefighting as they age, a time when most heart problems occur.

In the Harvard study, researchers examined a federal registry of 1,144 on-duty firefighter deaths between 1994 and 2004.

Excluded were the 343 firefighters who perished in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Nearly 40 percent — or 449 — of the on-duty deaths during that period were due to heart disease. Thirty-two percent of the heart-related deaths occurred while fighting blazes; 13 percent responding to an alarm; 17 percent returning from a call and 13 percent during physical training.

The researchers found the risk of death from heart disease was highest during active firefighting — up to 100 times greater than the risk of dying during administrative work — though firefighting made up no more than 5 percent of a firefighters' time.

Researchers believe mental stress and overexertion combined with factors such as being overweight and in poor shape may increase the risk of dying from heart disease.

"There's direct evidence to support that certain specific activities that firefighters do could trigger coronary heart disease events," said lead author Dr. Stefanos Kales of the Harvard School of Public Health.