

Why Is It an Issue for Firefighters?

As a firefighter, you face a unique risk of substance misuse and addiction due to a combination of psychological and physical factors. The stress and trauma that come with fighting fires and saving lives can take an enormous toll on your mind, resulting in nightmares, insomnia, intense stress and even mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression.

Alcohol and Firefighters

Many firefighters turn to alcohol to try and cope with the intense demands of their job. According to research, alcohol is the most commonly abused substance among firefighters. Alcohol use and alcohol misuse (including binge drinking) among firefighters has been documented in countless studies. Surveys of first responders have found that 85% of career firefighters reported past-month drinking, while career firefighters reported drinking 10 days a month, or about half of their off-duty days.

Alcohol is a depressant, which means it reduces the activity of the central nervous system. Even small amounts of alcohol can interfere with your ability to perform your job. This is one of the many reasons that it's so important to be able to identify the warning signs of alcohol misuse, as well as the options for treatment.

RESOURCES

International Association of Fire Fighters

www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/

855-900-8437

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Text your zip code to HELP4U (435748) to find help near you.

in the know

© 2025 Fire Safety Education, LLC
www.FireSafetyForLife.com • 877-329-0575 • product #PB-FP254
This pamphlet may not be copied.

SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER AND FIREFIGHTING

**Stay Safe,
Stay Sober**

Know the Signs of Alcohol Use Disorder

- Feeling unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink
- Wanting to cut down on how much you drink or making unsuccessful attempts to do so
- Spending a lot of time drinking, getting alcohol, or recovering from alcohol use
- Feeling a strong craving or urge to drink alcohol
- Failing to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or home due to repeated alcohol use
- Continuing to drink alcohol even though you know it's causing physical, social, work, or relationship problems
- Giving up or reducing social and work activities and hobbies to use alcohol
- Using alcohol in situations where it's not safe, such as when driving or swimming
- Developing a tolerance to alcohol so you need more to feel its effect, or you feel a reduced effect from the same amount
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms – such as nausea, sweating, and shaking – when you don't drink, or drinking to avoid these symptoms

Drugs and Firefighters

While some firefighters turn to the bottle for comfort, others find refuge in prescription and illicit substances – but the path to addiction can often start for therapeutic reasons. The physical demands of firefighting can lead to the use of painkillers, many of which have the risk of dependency or addiction. In many of these cases, addiction starts with an injury. What begins as safe, prescribed use can quickly spiral into dependence because of the highly addictive nature of pain-management medications.

Facing the Stigma

It's easy for the mental toll of firefighting and substance use problems to be swept under the rug in firefighting culture, where de-stressing with alcohol and camaraderie is normal. This culture can be a barrier to getting the help you need. Some examples include not talking about traumatic experiences, believing that an inability to compartmentalize on-the-job experiences as a sign of inability to work as a firefighter, and fear of appearing weak or unfit for duty.

Talking about a traumatic experience may not happen out of fear that it will lead to decreased trust amongst peers, less confidence in decision-making, and risk of job loss. While this stigma is currently being confronted, and broken down in many departments, it is still prevalent.

How to Help Others

Addiction can feel impossible to overcome. But you can win this battle if you have the right combination of support from friends, colleagues, and loved ones, along with evidence-based treatment and dedication to recovery. The first step is recognizing your problem. The second is getting help. There are resources available within the firefighting community and outside of it. The most important thing is to know that you are not alone. There are dedicated professionals who can help, and the best time to start on the path to recovery is right now.

