

COPD in the Line of Duty

The Overlooked Respiratory Risk for First Responders

Firefighters, police officers and EMS professionals face an elevated risk of developing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, due to repeated exposure to airborne toxins in the line of duty. These hazardous environments can silently damage the lungs over time, and occupational exposure accounts for nearly one-third of COPD cases among nonsmokers. The risks of COPD faced by first responders are a serious and underrecognized threat.



A Job with High Respiratory Risk

First responders are one of the most at-risk populations for developing COPD.

- 14% of COPD cases are attributable to occupational exposure.
- Emergency services jobs consistently rank in the top 10 industries for COPD risk.
- High physical strain and repeated respiratory stress contribute to COPD risk in these roles.



Toxic Environments, Limited Protection

Emergency scenes often involve hazardous air quality, especially during large-scale disasters.

- First responders are exposed to toxins like cement dust, silica, asbestos, fibrous glass, benzene and dioxins.
- Protective equipment is often inadequate or unavailable in urgent situations.
- Exposure levels vary, with those arriving earliest facing the greatest risks.



Lasting Health Consequences

Lung damage does not always appear immediately. Many first responders do not experience symptoms until years after exposure. A survey of FDNY firefighters found:

- 4.3% had COPD or emphysema, rising to 8.6% among retirees.
- Retired firefighters were 7.4 times more likely to have COPD than those still on active duty.

First responders protect others—their lung health deserves protection. Policymakers should prioritize policies that support early detection and access to treatment for COPD.