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Report of the Week

Do you know your risk factors?"
09/30/2010

Report Number: 10-0000945

Report Date: 07/08/2010 13:42

Synopsis

FF identifies personal cardiac event.

Demographics

Department type: Volunteer

Job or rank: Fire Chief

Department shift: Respond from home

Age: 61+

Years of fire service experience: 30+

Region: FEMA Region VII

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: On-duty activities: apparatus and station maintenance, meetings, tours, etc.

Event date and time: 04/17/2110 08:30

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Clear and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- Individual Action

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Life threatening injury

Event Description

Brackets [] denote reviewer de-identification.

For approximately 5 years, I had been working with my personal physician to reduce my "heart disease" risk factors. My lipid panel was well within accepted limits. Little did I know or understand the significance of heredity. The day before Mother's Day [year deleted], I drove the rescue squad to a medical emergency only to find upon arrival my mother in full arrest. In spite of our valiant efforts, the heart attack proved fatal for her at the age of [age deleted]. I didn't realize at the time that my family medical history was building and its future impact on me. On [date and year deleted], I met with the firefighter in charge of our recruiting drive while he was setting up the trailer. On my way home, I began to feel extremely weak and had chest discomfort. I went home, told my wife that I thought I was having a reaction to the new cholesterol medication that my doctor had just prescribed the day before. I went immediately to the local hospital emergency room. The ER doctor immediately

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ordered some routine tests, an EKG, and some blood work. The EKG was normal. The blood test results indicated that my "heart enzymes" were slightly elevated at .03. The doctor said that based on my family history, I needed a cardiac catheter immediately. I was taken to the Heart Hospital in [city and county deleted] where my cardiologist performed the catheter procedure and found my [life threatening blockage]. He implanted stents and advised, subsequent to additional testing, that I would recover fully. In our exit consultation, he emphasized that many people in the population do NOT get the classic signs of a heart attack: chest pain, radiating pain, sweating, shortness of breath, etc. He further stated that if I had not gone to the ER, the discomfort and weakness I experienced would have passed and that the next event would probably have been fatal.

His message to me, which he asked that I share with my fellow firefighters, was the importance of monitoring your risk factors (a process that minimized my event). Especially, we need to be aware of the impact that family medical history has on each individual. I was proactive, walking four miles four to five times a week and having regular check-ups with my personal physician. The combination of these activities in conjunction with promptly seeking medical attention saved my life. I call it a Medical Near-Miss.

Lessons Learned

My life threatening experience supports the statistics we so often hear about. One of the leading causes of firefighter line of duty deaths is heart attacks. The nature of the job in and of itself contains influences, which increases our exposure to risks. Risks not just found on the fire ground, but personal medical risks, zero to sixty exertions, weather extremes, adrenalin rushes, fear, interrupted sleep, etc. The understanding of the magnitude of our job, coupled with the awareness of our human frailty should cause us to monitor our personal physical condition and conduct frequent vulnerability assessments. With the advances in medical science since my mother's fatal event in [date deleted], the ability to prevent, diagnose and survive has greatly improved. We just need to use it as the people that call us do.

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Living a long and healthy life is a goal all of us seek to achieve. Cardiac related events are often preventable, but don't always materialize in the heat of battle. However, they often have as much to do with who is a part of our family tree than what we do to ourselves. As [10-945](#) conveys, knowing your risk factors and working with your physician can be life-saving knowledge. Even when we take care of ourselves, the risk factors that we have little control over can be just as threatening as undiscovered fire in the walls.

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Time and again we hear of someone suffering a "silent" heart attack. Or they go for days with numbness and pain chalked up to indigestion, a pulled muscle, or just being out of shape; then are dropped by a massive MI. Knowing your family history for cardiac events should be a factor in your assessment of unexplained weakness, chest discomfort, or other unexplained ill feeling. Given the high incidence of firefighters suffering cardiac related events, these symptoms should not be ignored. Today's medical technology includes interventions that save lives every day if action is taken quickly. The reporter's quick action and his physician's recognition of heredity turned this potentially fatal event into a near miss that had a positive outcome.

Once you have reviewed the entire account of 10-945 and the related reports, consider the following:

1. Do you know your full family history relative to all medical issues?
2. Did your last physical include a cardiac stress test?
3. Is your physician aware of the requirements of NFPA 1582, Standard on Comprehensive Occupational Medical Program for Fire Departments?
4. How many members of your fire department have experienced a cardiac event? Did the event occur on or off duty?
5. What is your state's "presumption" law for firefighters?

Related Reports - Topical Relation: Cardiac Wellness

[05-329](#) [06-287](#) [07-1051](#) [08-247](#) [09-481](#)

Have you experienced a cardiac event that qualifies as a near miss? Commit a death defying act by telling your story on www.firefighternearmiss.com ; so somebody else will go home because of you.

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.

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