



Is Your Fire Department Doctor Fit For Duty?

Yearly firefighter physical exams play an important role in keeping your firefighters medically fit for duty. Yearly exams can find medical issues before they become a problem. This includes diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, high cholesterol, abnormal lung function and many others issues. However, there is sometimes a breakdown in communication in dealing with these newfound issues. A well designed NFPA 1582 medical program can help resolve medical problems while keeping most firefighters working during the process. A lot of this depends on your Fire Department Doctor. Doctors who are well versed in NFPA 1582 know the right questions to ask and what to expect from the firefighter and their primary care physician.

There are a lot of qualified doctors performing firefighter exams, but unfortunately there are some who are not as familiar with NFPA 1582 as they should be. Currently there is no certification process for physicians to perform firefighter physicals. How can you know that you are picking the right doctor for your department? This article will try to help guide you in deciding if your Fire Department Doctor is fit for duty.

Experience:

One of the first questions to ask your potential Fire Department Doctor is how many firefighter exams and departments they do in a year. While this may not speak to the quality of the medical exam, it may pertain to experience. See if they actually have a copy of the latest NFPA 1582 2013 manual. Does it look well-worn or brand new?

Do the doctors actually attend firefighter conferences and expos? How about lecturing at these expos or writing articles for state or national magazines? Do the doctors work with fire departments and national firefighter organizations to develop standard protocols?

References:

It is ok to ask a doctor for a list of references to call. Firefighters are a tight knit group of people, and willing to share both good and bad comments and experiences.

How do they handle medical issues?

Ideally, the fire chief should never be involved in dealing with medical issues. The Fire Department Doctor should ask for more information directly from the individual firefighter and his or her primary care physician. Even better, as most conditions are not life threatening, the firefighter should be given a temporary clearance to continue working as these medical issues are sorted out. We have seen some doctors who will fail a firefighter, then expect the chief to be in charge of obtaining the clearance letter from the individual firefighter. This places unnecessary risk and stress on the chief and department.

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Things a Good Fire Department Doctor Knows

An experienced Fire Department Doctor understands firefighter culture and knows the applicable medical standards. Firefighting is more than a job; it is a way of life. A good Fire Department Doctor does everything possible to keep a firefighter working as long as it can be done safely. Ending a career unnecessarily is one of the worst mistakes a Fire Department Doctor can make. Unfortunately, it happens all too often. A doctor that doesn't know or understand NFPA 1582 makes judgment calls that are not based on safety or evidence. This leads to ruined careers and potential legal issues.

Can you speak to your Fire Department Doctor?

A good Fire Department Doctor should be accessible. This means that you should be able to pick up the phone and talk to him or her. He should be a valuable member of your leadership team that you can depend on when dealing with medical issues. Their input should be vital to the functioning of your safety and health committee.

Will they stand with you if needed?

From time to time Fire Chiefs are confronted with difficult issues regarding health and safety. These situations often involve complex medical problems. Can you turn to your Fire Department Doctor and have faith that he is going to give you an answer that is reliable and firmly supported by current guidelines and practice? Is he willing to write something down that you can use to support the decision? A good Fire Department Doctor has access to not only current NFPA guidance but also experts in Occupational Medicine who can help bring clarity to health and safety issues.

How do you pick a good fire department doctor?

Ask the right questions. You interview potential candidates for your department, and you should interview your doctor too. Aside from all the attributes mentioned above, a good Fire Department Doctor should be able to demonstrate some basic knowledge of current standards and practices. Some good questions to ask include the following:

1. What is NFPA 1582? What year is the current version?
NFPA 1582 is the medical and fitness standard for firefighter members and candidates. The current standard was published in 2013.
2. What is the purpose of NFPA 1582?
To improve the health of firefighters through health and wellness counseling and the early detection of disease.
3. What are the two diseases most often seen in firefighters?
Heart disease and cancer

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4. What blood pressure medicines should firefighters not take?

Beta blockers, Alpha blockers and diuretics

5. Is insulin allowed for diabetic firefighters?

Yes with appropriate monitoring

6. What are the two standards in NFPA and why?

There is a standard for Candidates and a Standard for Members. Candidate exams are much more stringent, with Class A and Class B conditions. Member exams are not as strict, do not have Class A or Class B conditions, and have more room for leniency from the Fire Department Doctor.

7. What blood thinners are acceptable for firefighters?

Aspirin only.

Bonus questions:

1. Can a firefighter who has lost vision in one eye return to work? If so, when?

Yes, new monocular vision requires a minimum of 6 months for depth perception accommodation in order to safely perform essential job tasks.

2. Can a firefighter with seizures be allowed to work? What are the guidelines?

Yes, but they must be seizure free for one year off of all medicines or five years on a stable medical regimen. All neurologic, imaging and EEG studies must be normal.

These questions should allow you to determine fairly quickly if a physician understands the basics of caring for firefighters.

A fit Fire Department Doctor is an asset to you and your department, but choosing the wrong doctor can cause legal and safety issues. Take the time to make sure that your Fire Department Doctor is fit for duty.

Lance Walker D.O. and Gonzalo Fernandez M.D.

SiteMed, is a physician owned occupational medicine company specializing in on-site firefighter exams. Drs. Fernandez and Walker have over 27 years combined experience in the occupational medicine industry. They welcome comments or questions at 1-888-837-4819 and through e-mail: gfernandez@sitemed.net and dlancewalker@sitemed.net.

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