

"Today's protection against cancer is not sufficient."

There are clothes that are said to provide firefighters with better protection against cancer than today's turnout gear can offer. But very few stations in Sweden have purchased them – none in Uppsala.

Uppsala

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– It's unique in itself that a profession is carcinogenic in 2024. In other professions, you can mitigate the risk with robots, but a firefighter has to go into the smoke regardless.

This is stated by Anders Cederberg, chairman of the Firefighters' Cancer Fund, which, among other things, works to raise money for research.

Several studies have been able to establish that fire smoke contains carcinogenic substances, and in the summer of 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the firefighter profession as "carcinogenic to humans."

Three firefighters at Uppsala Fire Department have told UNT about their cancer diagnoses. One of them, Svenne, got leukemia in 2010. At that time, he had been working as a smoke diver instructor for many years.

"That was back when we stood shoveling the coals afterward without masks. Of course, I see the connection," he says.

The firefighters Sten, Fredrik, and Svenne are in different stages of their cancer diagnoses. Recently, they told UNT about the connection they make to their profession.

It is suspected that there is a large number of unreported cases of firefighters being affected by cancer. This is stated by Robin Bultmark, safety representative at Uppsala Fire Department.

Especially since too few report their diagnoses as occupational diseases to the Social Insurance Agency.

– There are too few reports, it's probably inherent to firefighters' nature. You're solution-oriented and hesitant to report risks. I can guarantee that there have been cancer cases among us before, and to some extent still are, where there hasn't been knowledge of how and that one should report," says Robin Bultmark.

The Social Insurance Agency does not have its own statistics on how many firefighters have been affected by cancer and received compensation. They state that the requirement to have a disease considered as an occupational disease at all is that the person's ability to work is affected for at least one year and entails an income loss of at least one-fifteenth.

Increasing the number of firefighters receiving compensation when they have been affected by cancer is one of the goals of the Municipal Workers' Union. Mikael Svanberg, ombudsman and industry and professional responsible at the Union, only knows of a few cases where this has happened so far. The whole thing is complicated by the fact that firefighters until very recently retired at the age of 58.

– I think there are many who have retired who have not registered their cancer as an occupational injury," says Mikael Svanberg.

At all Uppsala fire stations, the so-called Healthy Firefighters model is followed.

It is a set of work routines that began to spread around Sweden in the early 2000s. Today, it is also used internationally. The routines place great demands on the fire stations: among other things, it should be possible to separate clean and dirty equipment, and to wash the alarm clothes in special washing machines.

But this is not enough as protection, according to Anders Cederberg of the Firefighters' Cancer Fund.
– The Healthy Firefighters model deals with risks before and after an operation. But during an operation, there hasn't been any good protection previously, and that's when we are most exposed to the toxins.

Since 2021, there has been a Swedish-made special undergarment with activated carbon in the fabric, inspired by one used by the American military. Studies conducted by Chalmers and Lund University show that the underwear significantly reduces the amount of carcinogenic substances released to the skin.

However, according to the manufacturer, only two stations in Sweden have purchased the undergarment, which costs just over 10,000 kronor each. None of Uppsala's fire stations are among them.

– There is nothing else that protects as well. The fact that employers do not purchase it is cynical: that they have access to the undergarment but still accept the risk of cancer," says Anders Cederberg.

Elisabeth Samuelsson, chief of Uppsala Fire Department, says they do everything they can to protect the firefighters and the service technicians who handle dirty equipment - based on the knowledge they have.

– Then we don't have all the knowledge we need yet. There are such unpredictable chemical reactions when something burns, so we don't know exactly which gases are formed and which ones pass through our alarm clothes. So we absolutely need to learn more about risks and how to protect ourselves. Absolutely most important is to protect the airways.