

BILL WOULD TEST ALL FIREFIGHTERS FOR BLADDER CANCER, CREATE TRACKING SYSTEM

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JULY 27, 2005.....Firefighters in Massachusetts could soon have free access to a test that could save their lives.

Key lawmakers on Wednesday endorsed a proposal to include bladder cancer screening procedures as part of a firefighter's annual physical, and establish a registry with the state Department of Public Health to track incidents of bladder cancer among firefighters. Lawmakers say the program and registry would cost the state roughly \$630,000 annually.

Rep. Patricia Walrath, a Stow Democrat who chairs the Health Care Financing Committee, said bladder cancer is seen as an "occupational hazard" for firefighters, given their high exposure to toxins and chemicals emitted by fires. Similar legislative action in Canada, medical studies linking the profession and the disease, and anecdotal stories have prompted the action.

"Firefighters are at a very high risk," Walrath said prior to the committee endorsing the bill. The legislation now heads to the House Ways and Means Committee for further financial evaluation.

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), 63,210 new cases of bladder cancer nationally will be diagnosed this year, and roughly 13,180 people will die from the disease. When detected early, bladder cancer has a high survival rate.

There is no known direct cause of bladder cancer, but the ACS links several professions and exposure to certain toxins to incidents of the disease. Smoking is the leading cause of bladder cancer, along with exposure to the carcinogens contained in smoke, or so-called products of combustion. According to the ACS, chemicals contained in smoke are absorbed into the blood stream, filtered by the kidneys and concentrated in urine. The chemicals in the urine damage the cells in bladder and lead to a higher chance of developing cancer.

Industrial chemicals found in rubber, leather, textiles, and paint are also linked to bladder cancer, according to the ACS, giving truck drivers, hairdressers, painters and machinists a higher risk of developing the disease.

Firefighters and fire inspectors, some say, are at a greater risk during the time immediately following a fire, when they may have removed their masks or materials are still smoldering and giving off high levels of dangerous toxins.

A product developed by the Newton-based company Matritech and recently approved by the Food and Drug Administration provides an inexpensive alternative to a urologist exam, lawmakers said, costing \$16.50 to purchase. Stephen Chubb, CEO and founder of Matritech, said the prescription-only product is performed on a single urine sample, but can be performed in a firehouse or in a doctor's office with some supervision.

The legislation does not specifically require the state to purchase Matritech's test, but lawmakers said it is a likely source since it is currently the only product on the market that can screen for bladder cancer in a "non-invasive" manner.

"This is a very simple, very accurate, totally non-invasive test," said Rep. Rachel Kaprielian (D-Watertown), lead House sponsor of the legislation. "Where we can find a particular group where there is a very high concentration of cancer, we should target that group and help with prevention efforts."

Firefighters in Everett took matters into their own hands and tested the entire department this year. Everett Fire Chief David Butler said the department has had four or five incidents of bladder cancer during the last several years, and was approached by Matritech to purchase the product at a reduced price. Butler said no firefighters were found to have bladder cancer as the result of the test.

"Nationally, we have an above average rate of cancer," Butler said. "And I think we're well above that average."

Chubb said a recent meeting of medical professionals and firefighters in Michigan determined that incidents of bladder cancer among firefighters are roughly twice that of other people.

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