

Sleep disorders found to be highly prevalent in firefighters

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Sleep disorders are independent risk factors for heart attacks and motor vehicle crashes, which are the two leading causes of death for firefighters in the United States. In a national sample of almost 7,000 firefighters, researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) examined the prevalence of common sleep disorders and their association with adverse health and safety outcomes and found that sleep disorders are highly prevalent, and associated with substantially increased risk of motor vehicle crashes and cardio-metabolic diseases among firefighters.

Findings of the study, led by Laura K. Barger, PhD, associate physiologist in BWH's Division of Sleep and Circadian Disorders, are published in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine* on November 13, 2014.

"Our findings demonstrate the impact of common sleep disorders on firefighter [health](#) and safety, and their connection to the two leading causes of death among firefighters," said Barger. "Unfortunately, more than 80 percent of firefighters who screened positive for a common sleep disorder were undiagnosed and untreated."

Based on specific criteria, 66 US fire departments were selected to participate in a workplace based sleep disorders screening and educational program. Approximately 7,000 firefighter participants were assessed for common sleep disorders. Firefighters were also surveyed about health and safety, and documentation collected for reported [motor](#)

[vehicle](#) crashes.

Participants reported current health status, previous diagnoses of sleep and other medical disorders, the likelihood of falling asleep while driving, [motor vehicle crashes](#), near crashes, and injuries.

Researchers found that a total of 37.2 percent of firefighters screened positive for sleep disorders including [obstructive sleep apnea](#), insomnia, shift work disorder and restless leg syndrome. Firefighters with a sleep disorder were more likely to report a motor vehicle crash and were more likely to report falling asleep while driving than those who did not screen positive. Additionally, firefighters with sleep disorders were more likely to report having cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression and anxiety, and to report poorer health status, compared with those who did not screen positive.

"Occupational sleep disorder screening programs can identify individuals who are vulnerable to adverse safety and health consequences, including those that are leading causes of death in [firefighters](#)," stated Charles Czeisler, PhD, MD, FRCP, chief, BWH Division of Sleep and Circadian Disorders. "This study provides the rationale for further research evaluating the effectiveness of occupational [sleep disorders](#) management programs on disease risk, mental health and safety outcomes."

Provided by Brigham and Women's Hospital

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