

Firefighter FITNESS: Fit to Serve, Fit for Life

2026 FIREFIGHTER
SAFETY
STAND DOWN



EVALUATION

The "Fit for Duty" Evaluation Guide



THURSDAY: EVALUATION

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As first responders, we aren't just "working out" – we are training for one of the most demanding jobs out there. To be at our best, we need more than a mirror check; we need data. This document outlines a comprehensive evaluation strategy to ensure that all first responders are prepared for the rigors of the fireground and a long, healthy career.

The Internal Metrics (Body Comp, HRV, & The Annual Medical)

Body Composition: Beyond the Scale

Weight is a poor metric for a firefighter. For example, a 220-lb firefighter could be a powerhouse of lean muscle or a liability with high visceral fat. We focus on **Body Composition** to ensure we have the "engine" to carry the gear.

- **The Goal:** Aim for a healthy body fat percentage (typically 12–20% for men, 18–26% for women) and, more importantly, a low waist-to-hip ratio.
- **Why it Matters:** High body fat increases cardiac strain and heat stress – the leading killers in the fire service.
- **The Method:** Use skinfold calipers or bioelectrical impedance scales. Track changes over time rather than daily weight fluctuations.
 - The army has this fat calculator:
<https://www.armyresilience.army.mil/abcp/BodyFatCalculator.html>

Heart Rate Variability (HRV): The Stress Compass

HRV is the gold standard for measuring your autonomic nervous system. It measures the variation in time between each heartbeat.

- **High HRV:** You are recovered, resilient, and ready for a high-intensity training day or a long shift.
- **Low HRV:** Your body is under stress (lack of sleep, poor nutrition, or overtraining).
- **The Fire Service Application:** Monitoring HRV tells you when to push and when to focus on active recovery to avoid burn out from the cumulative stress of the job.

The Annual Physical: Your Most Critical Piece of PPE

A Resource for the Fire Service

In the fire service, we are meticulous about inspecting our gear. We check our SCBA daily, we hydro-test our cylinders, and we wouldn't dream of entering a structure without a functional radio. Yet, many of us neglect the most important piece of equipment we own: **our own bodies**.

Data from the First Responder Center for Excellence (FRCE) is clear – firefighting is an occupational hazard that places us at a significantly higher risk for cancer, cardiovascular events, and mental health struggles compared to the general population. An annual medical evaluation is not just a "check-the-box" requirement; it is a life-saving diagnostic tool.

The Big Three: Why a Standard Physical Isn't Enough

A "general" physical designed for a sedentary office worker is insufficient for the demands of the fireground. Firefighters require occupational-specific screenings that focus on the following:

1. Cardiovascular Health (The #1 Killer)

Sudden cardiac events account for nearly 50% of on-duty fatalities. Heat, stress, and heavy lifting endured on the job puts extreme strain on the heart.

- **The Difference:** Beyond blood pressure, firefighters should be screened for structural heart changes and coronary artery calcium (CAC). A CAC scan can identify "hidden" plaque years before a heart attack occurs.

2. Cancer Screening (The Modern Threat)

Firefighters are exposed to a "toxic soup" of carcinogens (like benzene and formaldehyde) on every fireground. We have higher rates of multiple cancers, including testicular, prostate, skin, and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

- **The Difference:** Annual skin checks, more frequent colonoscopies, and aggressive screening for lung and bladder cancers are essential due to our unique exposures.

3. Behavioral Health & Sleep

The cumulative trauma and sleep deprivation of the job are not just "part of the work" – they are medical issues. High rates of PTSD and sleep apnea contribute directly to cardiac risk and overall health decline.

- **The Difference:** Annual medicals provide a private setting to screen for depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders that can be treated before they become crises.

The "Healthcare Provider's Guide" Strategy

Many primary care physicians don't understand what firefighters do. They see a fit-looking individual and assume everything is fine. **You must be your own advocate.**

- **Take the Guide with You:** Download and print the [Healthcare Provider's Guide to Firefighter Medical Evaluations](#). Give it to your doctor.

- **Explain the Risk:** Ensure your physician understands your occupational exposures to carcinogens and extreme physical stress.
- **Establish a Baseline:** Even if you feel 100% today, you need a baseline of your lung function (spirometry), heart health, and blood work to track changes over your 20- to 30-year career.

The Bottom Line

We spend our careers saving others, but we can't help anyone if we are in a hospital bed – or worse. The annual physical is the ultimate "early warning system." It allows us to catch issues when they are treatable, ensuring we not only make it to retirement but actually get to enjoy it.

Don't wait for a symptom. Schedule your physical today.

Physical Performance & Mobility

The Fundamental Mobility Test: The Overhead Squat

If you can't move well, you can't perform well. Poor mobility leads to compensations that cause back, knee, and shoulder injuries.

- **The Test:** Hold a PVC pipe or broomstick overhead with arms locked. Perform a deep squat while keeping the heels down and the chest up.
- **What to Look For:** Do your heels lift? Does the bar tilt forward? Does your back arch excessively?
- **The Fix:** If you "fail" this, your "Fit for Duty" plan needs to prioritize ankle, hip, and thoracic spine mobility before adding heavy loads.

Functional Fitness Evaluation

We don't play professional sports; our "game" involves carrying 75 lbs. of gear up stairs. Here is one way to evaluate "Fire Rescue Athlete" readiness:

Test Component	Fireground Relevance	Target Metric
1.5 Mile Run	Aerobic capacity for long-duration incidents.	Under 12:00 minutes

Max Push-ups (1 min)	Upper body endurance for crawling/pushing.	35+ Reps
Plank Hold	Core stability for lifting and moving patients.	2:00 Minutes
3-Minute Step Test	Rapid heart rate recovery after exertion.	"Good" or "Excellent" rating

The "Fit for Duty" Benchmarks

How to Evaluate Your Overall Level of Fitness

To truly know if you are ready for the next call, you must evaluate the **Four Pillars of a Fire Rescue Athlete**:

1. **Strength:** Can you lift a heavy victim or a charged hose line? (Evaluate via deadlift or squat.)
2. **Power:** Can you burst into action when a mayday is called? (Evaluate via broad jump or power clean.)
3. **Endurance:** Can you work through multiple cylinders of air? (Evaluate via the 1.5-mile run or a 500m row.)
4. **Mental Resilience:** Can you maintain your technique and decision-making under fatigue?

In addition to your annual medical, self-evaluate every 90 days. Tracking these metrics is the difference between hoping you're ready and *knowing* you're ready.

Action Steps for Improvement

- **Learn Something:** Understand your HRV and what "recovery" actually looks like.
- **Do Something:** Perform the overhead squat test today and schedule your annual medical.
- **Share Something:** Help your crew get on a movement-based warm-up before your next workout.

Additional Resources

[First Responder Center for Excellence Resources for Firefighter Physicals](#)

[FireRescue1: Fitness Testing for First Responders](#)

[Firehouse: Are You Fit for Duty](#)

Disclaimer: The information and resources presented in this document are for informational purposes only. They are not intended to offer a diagnosis or treatment of any health issue. Consult a healthcare professional if you feel you may be experiencing a health issue or for any questions you may have. This document does not provide a comprehensive listing of resources that are available.

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