

Survivor Story: Roger Lance

**Monument, CO Local 4319 / Fire Lieutenant
Diagnosed with colon cancer in 2021**

My name is Roger Lance. I'm a husband and father to two incredible kids. I'm a 20-year fire fighter/lieutenant and a cancer survivor. I was asked by the Firefighter Cancer Support Network to share my story and recent cancer diagnosis.

I was diagnosed in December 2021 with occupational stage 2 colon cancer. I had been symptomatic for about five years going back to 2017, but consistently dismissed what my body was telling me. I was experiencing random, but intense, episodes of stomach cramping, and periodically would notice blood after using the bathroom.

Because I was never in any pain, I never thought much of it. Just random episodes. I mentioned it to my primary doctor at my annual checkup in 2018, but given my age and being relatively healthy, he blew it off and said it was probably just a hemorrhoid.

That diagnosis sat uncomfortable with me at the time, but it seemed plausible. I didn't imagine in my wildest dreams that it was anything significant. However, the symptoms continued and became more frequent.

Then COVID hit. Getting a doctor's appointment was difficult. Not wanting to hassle with the mess, I neglected my annual checkup in 2020.

By November 2021, symptoms that started random and periodic were now weekly if not daily. It had been four years since I first recognized something was not quite right and mentioned it again at my annual physical.

My primary agreed that this was odd, and that I should go in for a colonoscopy. Ten days before Christmas, I had the procedure done.

After waking up, the GI doc said he found a tumor the size of my pinky finger. He explained that it would need to be surgically removed and that he would refer me out. A phone call a few days later confirmed that lab reports showed the mass to be cancerous.

The next few weeks were intense, and surgery was scheduled for the first week of January 2022.

Surgery was invasive. They made five incisions and removed 11 inches of colon. I spent a week in the hospital, and another six miserable weeks recovering.

It was an extremely stressful and emotional year, and yet I consider myself to be incredibly lucky. Colon cancer is one of the few cancers that can be treated surgically. If addressed early enough, it is very treatable and has a high survival rate.

Doctors feel they were able to remove the tumor before it had grown outside of the colon wall, with no spread to the liver, lungs, or other surrounding tissue. Currently, we are watching a couple of "spots" that showed up on the MRI and will spend the next many years going in for tests, scans, colonoscopies, blood draws, etc.

Nobody takes this job expecting that they will one day be diagnosed with cancer. When I first came on the job, cancer wasn't something we talked or even thought about. We would put on our bunker gear the first run of the day and would wear it until dinner.



JANUARY

Is Fire Fighter Cancer Awareness Month

At night, we would put our pants down over our boots and place them right next to the bed in the bunk room, ready for next call. We wouldn't wash our gear more than once or twice a year. We would run the trucks in the bay, we would overhaul in t-shirts. And we wouldn't put on our masks until the smoke was too thick to breathe. And our helmets... they were a symbol of our experience, the dirtier the better.

Subconsciously, I think we knew better. We knew this wasn't healthy. But we were young and full of ourselves. Trying to be humble in a profession that requires us to stand out. Risk a lot to save a lot, as the saying goes. Cancer was something you read about in Firehouse Magazine, or the supplemental insurance guy would talk about once a year. It never seemed realistic to me that this could come home. But I promise you, the longer you're in this business, the closer to home it will hit.

In my career, I've lost two friends, also firemen, who eventually passed away from occupational cancer. And still... I never thought it would happen to me.

According to the IAFF, 75% of line of duty deaths are from cancer. Another 20% are from cardiac events.

Consider the amount of energy and time we spend training: staying oriented, recognizing signs of flashover, collapse, HazMat, extrication, EMS, rescues, high/low angle, water and ice, and a slew of other safety training topics... and yet hardly a thought or mention to address our biggest killer. Why is that?

A lot of the silly things we did 20 years ago have changed, and in recent years there has been a much-needed cultural shift; awareness has increased thanks to foundations such as the Firefighter Cancer Support Network and the IAFF. In collaboration with fire departments and universities across the nation, they've all been working to raise awareness and discover what it is that is killing us in numbers that outweigh the general population.

I often question why I waited five years to advocate for myself with my doctor. I feel doctors who don't understand our profession often lack the insight or appreciate the health hazards that are unique to firefighters. If I had one piece of advice, it would be to listen to what your body is telling you. If something doesn't feel right, it's probably not. I was lucky and was diagnosed before the disease progressed to an untreatable stage. Had I waited much longer, this story could have had a very different tone.

I am now back on the line and working at full capacity. Three months after surgery, I was staged at level 0 and am expected to make a full recovery. I consider myself to be extremely lucky, and now have a very different outlook on life, and have changed my perception of firefighting and safety precautions.

Thank you to the doctors and scientists at the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of Miami, and the Firefighter Cancer Initiative. A personal thank you to Mark Livingston with the Firefighter Cancer Support Network, who helped walk me through my initial diagnosis. Within days of reaching out, I received the FCSN toolbox. It contained so much information and tools to help manage the onslaught of things that were about to come my way. More importantly, having a brother who understood the job and was patient and compassionate from the beginning was invaluable.

Thank you to every firefighter who took the time to read this. I hope my story can provide some assurance to my brothers and sisters recently diagnosed, and provide some insight to those who are carrying the torch and helping to progress awareness in their own organizations. Thank you, stay safe out there!

