



Fire Fighter Cancer Awareness and Prevention



SURVIVOR STORY: KRISTINA ROLLF

**South Adams County, CO Local 5124 / Lieutenant
Diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2021**

Going into the fire service, I knew the risk of cancer but I never really thought it would happen to me. I have always been diligent in wearing my PPE and washing every inch of gear after an exposure.

For me, it was at a routine physical when I first found out things weren't right. The doctor walked in and immediately saw the lump in my neck. The lump pushed out when I swallowed, talked or turned a certain way. Unfortunately, those were activities I didn't practice in front of the mirror while examining my throat. The doctor's level of concern was alarming. Right then, I began to expect that the final prognosis would be cancer. In one minute, my life completely changed and I couldn't control where it was headed. After the appointment, I sat in my car alone and sobbed.

I had symptoms for months. Swallowing felt forced, I coughed at weird, unexplained times and even started choking on my food. I wrote it off as bad allergies or eating too fast. For months, I took allergy pills with no relief but never thought there was another explanation. It's hard to explain how you feel or how you will react in the moments after a diagnosis. I was terrified, angry and felt dumb for not catching it sooner.

In the last five months, I have had multiple biopsies and ultrasounds to determine the extent of the cancer. I have had two surgeries to remove my thyroid, most of my parathyroids and four growths surrounding the area. Radiation was up next on the plan along with a regimen of 17 pills a day to regulate the hormones and chemicals my body no longer produces. Radiation was to hopefully be the end of my cancer journey. Things don't always go as you plan, though.

The day before Thanksgiving, I was notified that the recent ultrasound showed abnormal lymph nodes in my neck. More biopsies, ultrasounds, blood work and probably a third surgery await me before I can move on to radiation. That news was a huge blow and disappointment.





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Right now, I am in the middle of my fight. I am finding out it is full of ups and downs on an hour-to-hour basis. It's mentally and physically exhausting. My family at home and my family at work are all affected and on this journey with me. I couldn't handle this challenge without their love and support.

The resources and guidance that the Firefighter Cancer Network provide are invaluable. A coworker contacted the Network on my behalf and within a few days a toolbox was delivered to my house. The supplies to help me stay organized with the overwhelming paperwork was greatly appreciated. The Survivorship Guide was full of useful tips on how to talk to my kids

and loved ones about my diagnosis as well as ideas of how I can cope with my new reality. Mentors that have experienced their own cancer journey are there to answer questions and make you feel like you are never alone. I am beyond grateful for their dedication to help fire fighters and their families who are dealing with the hurdles and pain of a cancer diagnosis.