Cancer Risk Among Firefighters: A Review and Meta-analysis of 32 Studies

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Objective: *The objective of this study was to review 32 studies on firefighters and to quantitatively and qualitatively determine the cancer risk using a meta-analysis.* ***Methods:*** *A comprehensive search of computerized databases and bibliographies from identified articles was performed. Three criteria used to assess the probable, possible, or unlikely risk for 21 cancers included pattern of meta-relative risks, study type, and heterogeneity testing.* ***Results:*** *The findings indicated that firefighters had a probable cancer risk for multiple myeloma with a summary risk estimate (SRE) of 1.53 and 95% confidence interval (CI) of 1.21–1.94, non-Hodgkin lymphoma (SRE = 1.51, 95% CI = 1.31–1.73), and prostate (SRE = 1.28; 95% CI = 1.15–1.43). Testicular cancer was upgraded to probable because it had the highest summary risk estimate (SRE = 2.02; 95% CI = 1.30–3.13). Eight additional cancers were listed as having a "possible" association with firefighting.* ***Conclusions:*** *Our results confirm previous findings of an elevated metarelative risk for multiple myeloma among firefighters. In addition, a probable association with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, prostate, and testicular cancer was demonstrated.* (J Occup Environ Med. *2006;48: 1189–1202*)

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During the course of their work, firefighters are exposed to harmful substances at the fire scene as well as at the firehouse. At the fire scene, firefighters are potentially exposed to various mixtures of particulates, gases, mists, fumes of an organic and/or inorganic nature, and the resultant pyrolysis products.[1,2] Specific potential exposures include metals such as lead, antimony, cadmium, uranium, chemical substances, including acrolein, benzene, methylene chloride, polyaromatic hydrocarbons, perchlorethylene, toluene, trichloroethylene, trichlorophenol, xylene, formaldehydes, minerals such as asbestos, crystalline, and noncrystalline silica, silicates, and various gases that may have acute, toxic effects.[1,2] In some situations, respiratory protection equipment may be inadequate or not felt to be needed resulting in unrecognized exposure.[3] At the firehouse where firefighters spend long hours, exposures may occur to complex mixtures that comprise diesel exhaust, particularly if trucks are run in closed houses without adequate outside venting. In light of the World Trade Center disaster, concerns have reemerged and heightened related to building debris particle exposures from pulverized cement and glass, fiberglass, asbestos, silica, heavy metals, soot, and/or organic products of combustion.[3]

To date, only one meta-analysis conducted by Howe and Burch in 1990 examined the extent of cancer risk among firefighters in 11 mortality studies.[4] They reported that there was an increased association with the occurrence of brain tumors, malignant melanoma, and multiple myeloma with the evidence in favor of

causality somewhat greater for brain tumors and multiple myeloma. Since then, there have been numerous mortality and incidence studies. Hence, the purpose of this study was twofold. The first purpose was to update the Howe and Burch findings by reviewing the methodologic characteristics of these studies and determining the probability of cancer by assessing the weight of evidence, including the calculated metarisk estimates. The second purpose was to describe a methodology for use in a meta-analysis when diverse investigations are being evaluated and summarized.

Materials and Methods

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

Standardized mortality ratio (SMR), proportional mortality ratio (PMR), relative risk (RR), standardized incidence ratio (SIR), and case–control/mortality odds ratio (OR) studies related to firefighters and cancer risk were evaluated. For publication selection, at least 1 year in service as firefighters was required except for those studies basing employment on death certificates. Publications were retrieved by a search of computerized databases, including Medline (1966–December 2003), Health and Safety Science Abstracts (since 1980–December 2003), Cancerlit (1963–December 2003), NIOSHTIC and NIOSHTIC2 (up to December 2003), BIOSIS Previews (1980–December 2003), and PubMed (up to December 2003) using the following key words: firefighters, fire fighters, cancer. In addition to the computerized search, bibliographies in identified papers were reviewed for additional studies.

The search was restricted to reports published in English; abstracts and reviews were not included. Studies were excluded without basic data (eg, confidence intervals) that are necessary in the derivation of the meta-analysis risk estimate. If there was more than one article with the same or overlapping population, preference was given to the article providing more comprehensive information. The data were extracted from each article by one reviewer and was verified by another. Discrepancies identified by the second reviewer were resolved in a consensus meeting.

Likelihood of Cancer Risk. Statistically significant increases in cancer risks among firefighters were evaluated as the likelihood for cancer risk given a three-criteria assessment. The three criteria included "pattern of meta-relative risk association," "study type," and "consistency" among studies. These criteria were particularly important given the different methodologies used for evaluating cancer risk (ie, SMR, PMR, RR, SIR, and OR). These criteria were used in a forward approach as illustrated in Figure 1 in which at each stage, a new criterion was applied, and the probability of cancer risk was reassessed. The likelihood for cancer risk was given an assignment of "probable," "possible," or "not likely" patterned after the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) risk assessment of human carcinogenicity in terms of weight of the evidence.[5]

The "pattern of meta-relative risk associations" was the first criterion and included a two-step evaluation. For the

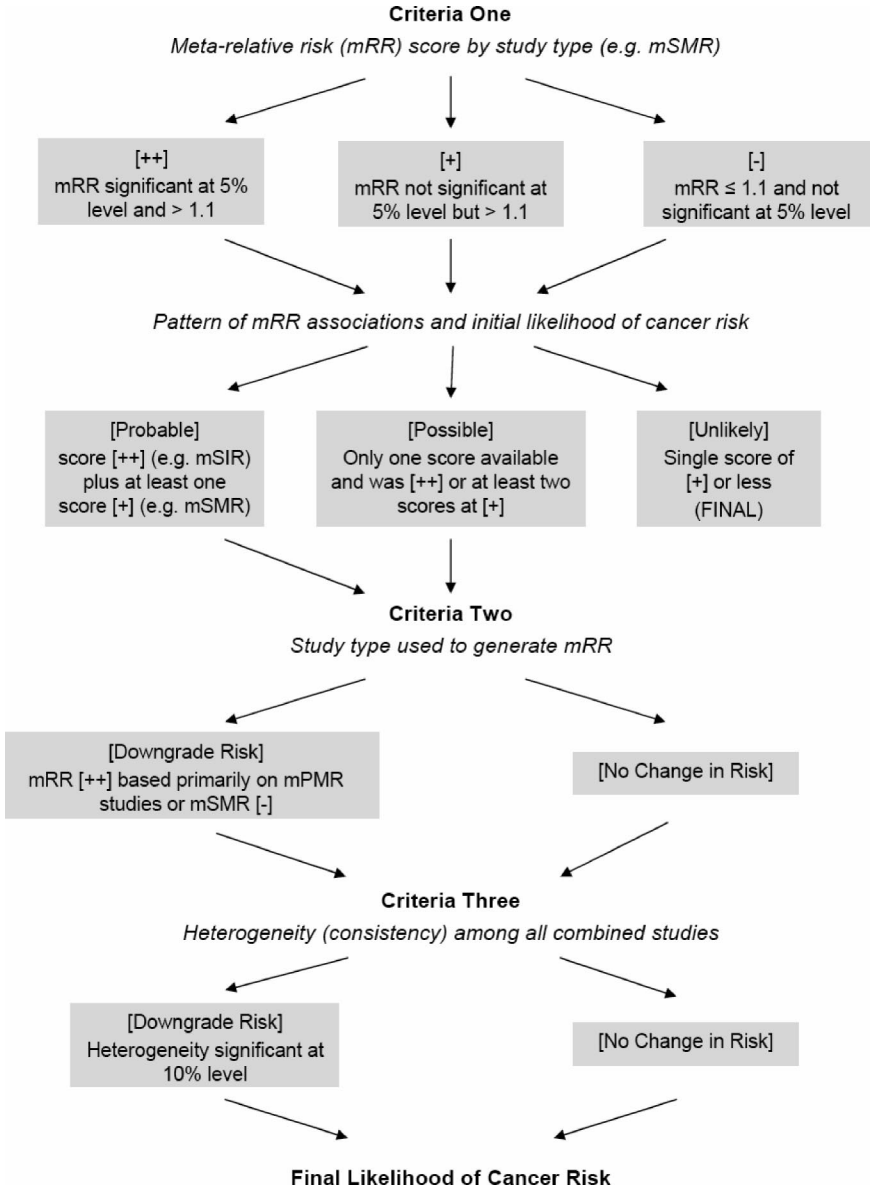

Fig. 1. Likelihood of cancer risk.

first step, the strength of the meta-analysis by each study type (eg, SMR, PMR) was assigned a score. The score of "++" was assigned if the meta-relative risk was statistically significant and greater than 1.1. The score of "+" was assigned if the meta-relative risk was not statistically significant, but the point risk estimate was greater than 1.1. The score of "−" was assigned if the meta-relative risk was not statistically significant, and the point risk estimate was equal to or less than 1.1. At the second step, these scores were used to assign a probable, possible, or unlikely designation for the pattern of meta-relative risk association. A "probable" was assigned to the cancer-specific site if one meta-relative risk (ie, mSMR, mPMR, mSMR and PMR, mRR, mSIR, mOR) was statistically significant (score of ++) and at least another was greater than 1.1 (score of +). A "possible" assignment was given if only one meta-relative risk was available and was statistically significant (score of ++) or if at least two meta-relative risks were greater than 1.1 but were not statistically significant (score of +). "Not likely" was assigned if the cancer-specific site did not meet the probable or possible criteria.

The second criterion examined the "study type" used to generate meta-relative risks. If the meta-relative risk estimate reached statistical significance (score of ++), based primarily on PMR studies, the level was downgraded. PMR studies do not measure the risk of death or death rates but rather the relative frequency of that particular cause among all causes of death. Hence, the limitation of a PMR study is that the estimate may be abnormally low or high based on the overall increase or decrease in mortality and not due to the cause of interest.[6] Also, if the mSMR point risk estimate was not significant and ≤1.1 (−), the level was downgraded. The third criterion used for generating the likelihood of cancer risk was an assessment of "inconsistency" among studies. Heterogeneity testing as described in statistical methods was used to evaluate inconsistency. The level was downgraded if heterogeneity (inconsistency) testing among all combined studies had an $\alpha \leq 0.10$.

Statistical Methods

For all cancer outcomes having two or more studies, the observed and expected values from each study were summed and a meta-relative risk estimate (mRR) was calculated. An mRR was calculated for each cancer by each study type, eg, SMR studies and as a summary meta-relative risk across all study types. The mRR was defined as the ratio of the total number of observed deaths or incident cases to the total number of expected deaths or incident cases as follows:

$$mRR = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} O_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} E_i}$$

where O_i denotes observed deaths (cases) in each individual study, E_i denotes expected deaths (cases), and n is the total number of studies.[7] The 95% confidence interval (CI) of mRR may be computed using the Poisson probability distribution as described by Breslow and Day.[8] The standard error (SE) for the meta-relative risk is calculated as $SE = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\Sigma W_i}}$ where W_i is the statistical weight for a given study defined as $1/SE_i^2$ and SE_i is the standard error for a given study.

In the absence of heterogeneity, the fixed-effect model was applied for deriving the meta-relative risk estimate; otherwise, the random-effects model was used. A test for heterogeneity for the fixed-effect approach is given by $Q = \Sigma_{i=1}^{n} W_i * \{\log(RR_i) - \log(mRR)\}^2$ where RR_i and mRR are the relative risk and the meta-relative risk, respectively. The hypothesis of homogeneity among studies would be rejected if Q exceeds $\chi^2_{n-1,\alpha}$. Then the random-effects model was used with a different study weight (W_i*) that further accounts for the interstudy variation in effect size.[8] The weighing factor W_i* in the DerSimonian and Laird random-effects model is

$$W_i^* = \frac{1}{\left[D + \left(\frac{1}{w_i}\right)\right]}$$

where W_i is the statistical weight for a given study for the fixed-effect model and is equal to $1/SE_i^2$ with SE_i being the standard error for a given study according to Chen and Seaton.[9]

$$D = \frac{[Q - (n-1)] * \sum_{i=1}^{n} W_i}{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} W_i\right)^2 - \sum_{i=1}^{n} W_i^2}$$

It should be noted that D is set to 0 if $Q < n - 1$. The random-effects model was validated against data provided in Petitti,[10] which after application using our equations gave identical results. For this study, an $\alpha \leq 10\%$ or less for declaring heterogeneity was adopted.[11]

The SAS software was used to perform the calculations and validated our program for the fixed-effect model using data from different studies compiled by Howe and Burch[4] on standardized mortality ratios and proportional mortality ratios among firefighters. Where there were no observed deaths or incident cases, the lower confidence interval for an individual study was set at 0.1 as suggested in the method used by Collins and Acquavella.[12] This method was compared with the data excluding studies with a zero relative risk, and the results were similar.

Results

Identification and Characteristics of Studies

The computerized literature search identified 21 U.S. and 14 non-U.S. articles.[13–47] It was determined that three studies were not eligible for the meta-analysis because of either insufficient data,[41] data were combined for firefighters and other personnel,[42] or

the text was not published in English.[43] In addition, four studies[44–47] were excluded because of overlapping populations with other reports.[18,30] For example, in 1992, Demers et al[18] reported more observed and expected cancers than in the 1994 article.[46] Four additional studies[48–51] were identified in the review by Howe and Burch[4] and used in the meta-analysis. These latter four studies are not presented in Table 1. Hence, a total of 28 studies received a detailed review as shown in Table 1, which describes the study design characteristics, exposure, and outcome definitions. Sixteen were U.S. studies and 12 were non-U.S. investigations. Five studies had an internal comparison group with the remaining using regional or national comparison groups. Fourteen ascertained exposures from employment records and defined exposure as a dichotomous (yes/no) variable. The majority of the studies relied on death certificates for assessing a cancer diagnosis. Of a total of 32 articles, 26 are included in the meta-analysis as shown in Table 2. The six additional articles are case–control/mortality odds ratio studies and presented in Table 3 with one meta-analysis for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Overview of Meta-analysis

Table 2 summarizes the meta-analysis results by study type. Studies were mostly mortality and were analyzed using SMRs and PMRs. All-cause mortality had an SMR 10% less than general population rates. Mortality from all cancers was similar to the general population using SMR and RR indices, but PMR studies showed a 10% significantly higher rate (Table 2). For individual cancers, there were statistically significant elevated meta-SMR estimates for colon cancer (1.34) and multiple myeloma (1.69). PMR studies demonstrated three significantly elevated meta-PMR values that included skin (1.69), malignant melanoma (2.25), and multiple myeloma (1.42). There was one significantly elevated meta-relative risk for esophageal cancer (2.03). Incidence studies showed significant meta-SIR for cancers of the stomach (1.58), prostate (1.29), and testis (1.83).

As shown in Table 3, only one cancer type, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, had two mortality OR analyses, and both were significant. The estimated mOR was essentially based on Ma et al[14] due to the much larger sample size of firefighters (n = 4800) compared with 23 for Figgs et al.[15] Odds ratios were significantly higher for buccal cavity/pharynx (5.90) and Hodgkin's disease (2.4)[14] as well as the single incidence study related to bladder cancer (2.11) and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (3.27).[22]

The next step was to determine the likelihood of cancer risk based on the three criteria assessment. Cancers receiving "probable" and "possible" designations are shown in Table 4. Based on evaluating the first criterion "pattern of meta-relative risk" for the 20 cancer sites, eight were designated as "probable," four as "possible," and eight as an unlikely risk. Based on the second criteria "study type" stomach, rectum, skin cancer, and malignant melanoma risk were downgraded because of reliance on PMR studies for statistical significance or the mSMR point risk estimate was not significant and $\leq$1.1.

For the third criterion, "inconsistency" among all studies caused a downgrading for only colon cancer to "possible." This inconsistency may have been related to several factors, including study type and a cohort effect. There were 14 SMR and PMR colon cancer studies with elevated meta-risk estimates of 1.34 and 1.25, respectively (Table 2). Of these 14 studies, there were 11 (78.6%) with firefighters employed on or before 1950. In contrast, there were six mRR and SIR studies with meta-risk estimates of 0.91 and 0.90, respectively, with half employed on or before 1950. It is possible that the older cohorts had higher exposures due to a lack of awareness of the hazards or use of protective equipment.

A final check on the three criteria assessment presented in Table 4 was made by calculating an overall summary of cancer risk across all studies (ie, SMR, PMR, RR, SIR, OR). There was agreement that cancer was unlikely between the criteria assessment and the not significant summary risk estimates for esophagus, liver, pancreas, larynx, lung, bladder, kidney, and Hodgkin's disease and all cancers (Table 5). Differences between the two approaches were found for cancers of the buccal cavity/pharynx and leukemia because these were designated as possible by the criteria assessment but as not significant in the summary risk estimate. The remaining cancers were all rated as probable or possible and all had significant summary risk estimates. Of note, testicular cancer received the highest summary risk estimate (OR = 2.02; 95% CI = 1.30–3.13) related to the SIR studies compared with the "possible" designation by the three criteria assessment.

Discussion

The meta-analysis and criteria assessment designate the likelihood of cancer among firefighters as probable for multiple myeloma and prostate cancer. Thus, the findings related to multiple myeloma are in agreement with Howe and Burch.[4] The Philadelphia firefighter study[13] was the largest cohort study reported to date investigating exposure–response relationships. For Philadelphia firefighters, the SMR results for multiple myeloma demonstrated an increasing trend with duration of employment as a firefighter: 0.73 (95% CI = 0.10–5.17) for under 9 years, 1.50 (95% CI = 0.48–4.66) for 10 to 19 years, and 2.31 (95% CI = 1.04–5.16) with six observed deaths for greater than 20 years. Except for race, there are essentially no known risk factors for multiple myeloma other than occupational exposures (eg, paints, herbicides, insecticides,

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Studies From Electronic Search

Reference	Company Location	Design/Analysis	Study Period	Number of Workers	Comparison Group	Exposure Variable	Exposure Source	Cancer Source	Cofactors
Baris, 2001[13]	Philadelphia	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1925–1986	7789	INT/NGP/NED	1, 3, 5	ER	DC	Age
Ma, 1998[14]	24 US states	Case–control (MOR)	1984–1993	6607	INT	4	DC	DC	Age/race
Figgs, 1995[15]	24 US states	Case–control (MOR)	1984–1989	23890 (cases) 119,450 (controls)	RGP	4	DC	DC	Age
Burnett, 1994[16]	27 US states	PMR	1984–1990	5744	INT	4	DC	DC	Age
Demers, 1993[17]	4 US states	Case–control (OR)	1977–1981	692 (cases) 1683 (controls)	LGP	4	TRV	TRV	Age
Demers, 1992a[18]	Seattle, Tacoma (WA)	Cohort mortality (SMR) Incidence (SIR)	1944–1979	4528	LGP INT/LW/NGP	4	ER	DCN, TRV	Age
Demers, 1992b[19]	Seattle, Tacoma, WA Portland	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1944–1979	4546	INT/LW/NGP	2, 3	ER	DCN	Age
Beaumont, 1991[20]	San Francisco	Cohort mortality (RR)	1940–1970	3066	NGP	3, 6	ER	DCN	Age/yr
Grimes, 1991[21]	Honolulu	PMR, RR	1969–1988	205	RGP	3, 4	ER	DC	Race
Sama, 1990[22]	Massachusetts	Case–control (MOR)	1982–1986	315	LW/RGP	4, 7	TRV	TR	Age/smoke
Vena, 1987[23]	Buffalo	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1950–1979	1867	NGP	3	ER	DCN	Age/yr
Feuer, 1986[24]	New Jersey	PMR	1974–1980	263	LW/RGP/NGP	3, 8	ER	DCN	Age
Morton, 1984[25]	Portland, Vancouver	Incidence (SIR)	1963–1977	1678	RGP	4	TR	TRV	Age
Dubrow, 1983[26]	British & USA	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1950–1977	—	—	4	AR	DC	None
Musk, 1978[27]	US	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1915–1975	5655	RGP, NGP	4	ER	DC	Age
Berg 1975[28]	US, Great Britain	Cohort mortality (SMR) and PMR	1949–1953 1959–1963	—	NGP	4	DC	DC	Age
Stang, 2003[29]	Germany	Case–control OR)	1995–1997	269 (cases) 797 (controls)	RGP	4	ER	MR	Age
Bates, 2001[30]	New Zealand	Cohort mortality (SMR) Incidence (SIR)	1977–1995	4221	NGP	3	AR	DC, TR	Age/yr
Firth, 1996[31]	New Zealand	Incidence (SIR)	1972–1984	26207	NED	4	TR	TR	Age
Deschamps 1995[32]	France	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1977–1991	830	NGP	2	ER	DCN	Age
Delahunt, 1995[33]	New Zealand	Case–control (RR)	1978–1986	710 (cases) 12,756 (controls)	NGP	4	TR	TR	Age/smoke
Aronson, 1994[34]	Canada	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1950–1989	5414	RGP	3, 6, 7	ER	DCN	Age/yr
Tornling, 1994[35]	Sweden	Cohort mortality (SMR) Incidence (SIR)	1931–1983	1153	LGP	1, 3, 7	ER	DC, TR	Age/yr
Giles, 1993[36]	Australia	Incidence (SIR)	1980–1989	2865	RGP	3, 6, 7	TRV	TR	Age
Guidotti, 1993[37]	Canada	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1927–1987	3328	RGP	2	ER	DCN	Age/yr
Hansen, 1990[38]	Denmark	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1970–1980	886	NED	4	OTH	DC	Age

(*Continued*)

TABLE 1
Continued

Reference	Company Location	Design/Analysis	Study Period	Number of Workers	Comparison Group	Exposure Variable	Exposure Source	Cancer Source	Cofactors
Eliopulos, 1984[39]	Australia	Cohort mortality (SMR) and PMR	1939–1978	990	RGP	3	ER	DC	Age/yr
Mastromatteo, 1959[40]	Canada	Cohort mortality (SMR)	1921–1953	1039	RGP	4	DC	DC	Age

Exposure Variables
1. Number of firefighter runs
2. Duration of "active" duty
3. Duration of employment overall as a firefighter
4. Occupation (based on death certificate or tumor registry)
5. Company type engine, ladder
6. Time since first employment
7. Age-specific
8. Employment status

Exposure or Cancer Source
ER, employment records
MR, medical records
AR, association records
DC, death certificate
DCN, death certificate nosologist
TR, tumor registry with no validation
TRV, tumor registry (occupation) with validation from external sources
OTH, other

Design/Analysis
RR, rate ratio
SMR, standardized mortality/morbidity ratio
MOR, mortality odds ratio
OR, odds ratio
PMR, proportional mortality ratio
SIR, standardized incidence ratio

Comparison Group:
INT = internal
LW = local workers
LGP = local general population
RGP = regional general population
NGP = national general population
NED = national employment database

engine exhausts, and organic solvents).[52–57] Benjamin et al[58] reported that blacks compared with whites have at least double the risk of being diagnosed with multiple myeloma and twice the mortality rate. Race may be ruled out as a potential factor among firefighters, because cancer risk was investigated primarily for whites.

The analyses for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma were consistent across a diversity of study designs, including SMR, PMR, SIR, and OR incident/mortality studies. All showed elevated meta-risk or point estimates. The overall summary risk estimate was significantly elevated at 1.51 (95% CI = 1.31–1.73). Hence, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is considered a probable cancer risk for firefighters. Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is, however, several cancer types with five International Classification of Disease (ICD) codes (200, 202.0, 202.1, 202.8, 202.9). Of importance is how the definition of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma by ICD code may contribute to the variability in study findings. For example, in a study by Demers et al[19] comparing firefighters with police, the mortality incidence-density ratio (IDR) for "lymphosarcoma and reticulosarcoma" (ICD 200) was not elevated (0.81)[19] but was (1.40) for "other lymphatic/hematopoietic" (ICD 202, 203). Subsequent to the time period covered in this review, Ma et al[59] examined Florida firefighters but evaluated only one of two cancers for ICD code 200, ie, lymphosarcoma but not reticular sarcoma and found nonsignificance (SMR = 0.94). Hence, these studies demonstrate the importance of being cognizant that differences in cancer risk estimates and interpretation of risk may be influenced by outcome definition.

Results showing a probable association for prostate cancer is curious. Prostate cancer is the most common malignancy affecting men and is the second leading cause of cancer.[60] Risk of developing prostate cancer is associated with advancing age, black

TABLE 2
Meta-relative Risk Estimates and Test for Inconsistency for Mortality and Incidence*

Disease	Number of Studies	Reference	Observed	Expected	Meta-relative Risk	95% Confidence Interval	*P* Value Inconsistency
Mortality studies							
Standardized mortality ratio (SMR)							
All causes (001–999)	12	13, 19, 23, 27, 30, 32, 34 35, 37–40	8384	9273.8	0.90	0.85–0.97	<0.00
All cancers (140–209)	13	13, 19, 23, 27, 30, 32, 34 35, 37–40, 51	1801	1799.9	1.00	0.93–1.08	0.02
Buccal cavity and pharynx (140–149)	5	13, 19, 32, 34, 37	34	29.8	1.14	0.79–1.60	0.84
Esophagus (150)	4	13, 19, 23, 34	17	25.1	0.68	0.39–1.08	0.62
Stomach (151)	7	13, 19, 23, 30, 34, 35, 37	75	81.3	0.92	0.73–1.16	0.72
Colon (153)	10	13, 19, 23, 26, 28, 30, 34, 35, 37, 51	252	188.3	1.34	1.01–1.79	<0.00
Rectum (154)	6	13, 19, 23, 30, 34, 35	54	40.7	1.33	1.00–1.73	0.43
Liver/gallbladder (155–156)	5	13, 19, 23, 34, 35	22	21.9	1.00	0.63–1.52	0.92
Pancreas (157)	6	13, 19, 23, 34, 35, 37	63	64.2	0.98	0.75–1.26	0.58
Larynx (161)	3	13, 19, 34	8	13.7	0.58	0.25–1.15	0.82
Lung (162)	8	13, 19, 30, 34, 35, 37, 38, 51	378	359.2	1.05	0.95–1.16	0.50
Skin (173)	3	13, 19, 37	16	15.7	1.02	0.58–1.66	0.68
Malignant melanoma (172)	2	30, 34	4	5.9	0.67	0.18–1.70	0.23
Prostate (185)	6	13, 19, 23, 34, 35, 37	104	91	1.14	0.93–1.39	0.67
Testis (186)	1	34	3	1.2	2.50	0.50–7.30	—
Bladder (188)	6	13, 19, 23, 30, 34, 37	41	33.0	1.24	0.68–2.26	0.03
Kidney (189)	6	13, 19, 23, 34, 35, 37	30	30.9	0.97	0.44–2.13	0.01
Brain and nervous system (191–192)	8	13, 19, 23, 27, 30, 34, 35, 37	64	46.1	1.39	0.94–2.06	0.07
Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (200, 202)	3	13, 19, 34	30	20.6	1.46	0.98–2.08	0.92
Hodgkin's disease (201)	2	19, 34	4	5.1	0.78	0.21–2.01	0.59
Multiple myeloma (203)	4	13, 26, 34, 51	24	14.2	1.69	1.08–2.51	0.15
Leukemia (204–208)	2	13, 19	30	29.9	1.00	0.68–1.43	0.27
Proportional mortality ratio (PMR)							
All cancers (140–209)	6	16, 24, 39, 48, 49, 50	2443	2215.7	1.10	1.06–1.15	0.64
Buccal cavity and pharynx (140–149)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Esophagus (150)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Stomach (151)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Colon (153)	4	28, 48, 49, 50	99	79.2	1.25	0.90–1.74	0.08
Rectum (154)	1	16	37	25	1.48	1.05–2.05	—
Liver/gallbladder (155–156)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Pancreas (157)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Larynx (161)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Lung (162)	4	16, 48, 49, 50	773	742.1	1.04	0.88–1.23	0.04
Skin (172–173)	2	16, 24	42	24.8	1.69	1.22–2.29	0.41
Malignant melanoma (172)	2	48, 49	9	4	2.25	1.03–4.27	0.49
Prostate (185)	—		—	—	—	—	—

(*Continued*)

TABLE 2
Continued

Disease	Number of Studies	Reference	Observed	Expected	Meta-relative Risk	95% Confidence Interval	*P* Value Inconsistency
Testis (186)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Bladder (188)	1	16	37	37.4	0.99	0.70–1.37	—
Kidney (189)	1	16	53	36.8	1.44	1.08–1.89	—
Brain and nervous system (191–192)	4	16, 48, 49, 50	64	54.9	1.17	0.90–1.49	0.27
Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (200, 202)	1	16	66	50	1.32	1.02–1.67	—
Hodgkin's disease (201)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Multiple myeloma (203)	4	16, 48, 49, 50	46	32.5	1.42	1.04–1.89	0.88
Leukemia (204–208)	2	16, 24	65	53.5	1.21	0.94–1.55	0.47
Relative risk (RR)							
All causes (001–999)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
All cancers (140–209)	2	20, 21	291	295.6	0.98	0.87–1.10	0.17
Buccal cavity and Pharynx (140–149)	1	20	11	7.7	1.43	0.71–2.57	—
Esophagus (150)	1	20	12	5.9	2.03	1.05–3.57	—
Stomach (151)	2	20, 21	25	20.6	1.21	0.80–1.81	0.55
Colon (153)	2	20, 21	25	27.5	0.91	0.60–1.36	0.92
Rectum (154)	1	20	13	9	1.44	0.77–2.49	—
Liver (155–156)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Pancreas (157)	1	20	17	13.6	1.25	0.73–2.00	—
Larynx (161)	1	20	3	3.8	0.79	0.17–2.35	—
Lung (162)	1	20	60	71.4	0.84	0.64–1.08	—
Skin (172–173)	1	20	7	4.1	1.71	0.68–3.49	—
Malignant melanoma (172)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Prostate (185)	2	20, 21	19	24.3	0.78	0.13–4.82	<0.00
Testis (186)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bladder (188)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kidney (189)	1	20	4	5.9	0.68	0.19–1.74	—
Brain and nervous system (191–192)	2	20, 21	9	7.1	1.26	0.55–2.34	0.14
Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (200, 202)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hodgkin's disease (201)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Multiple myeloma (203)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Leukemia (204–208)	1	20	6	9.8	0.61	0.22–1.33	—
Incidence studies (SIR)							
All cancers (140–209)	3	30, 35, 36	367	366.6	1.00	0.90–1.11	0.61
Buccal cavity and pharynx (140–149)	2	18, 36	25	19.6	1.28	0.83–1.88	0.73
Esophagus (150)	2	18, 30	10	7.6	1.32	0.63–2.42	0.51
Stomach (151)	3	18, 30, 35	38	24.1	1.58	1.12–2.16	0.33
Colon (153)	4	18, 30, 35, 36†	59	65.3	0.9	0.69–1.17	0.37
Rectum (154)	3	18, 30, 35	41	36.1	1.14	0.81–1.54	0.4
Liver (155–156)	1	35	4	4.7	0.85	0.23–2.18	—
Pancreas (157)	4	18, 30, 35, 36	22	18.2	1.21	0.76–1.83	0.83
Larynx (161)	2	18, 31	13	8.3	1.57	0.17–14.51	<0.00
Lung (162)	4	18, 30, 35, 36	111	120.0	0.93	0.76–1.11	0.83
Skin (172–173)	1	35	5	3.3	1.52	0.49–3.54	—
Malignant melanoma (172)	4	18, 30, 35, 36	60	47.9	1.25	0.96–1.61	0.87
Prostate (185)	4	18, 30, 35, 36	147	114.1	1.29	1.09–1.51	0.56

(*Continued*)

TABLE 2
Continued

Disease	Number of Studies	Reference	Observed	Expected	Meta-relative Risk	95% Confidence Interval	*P* Value Inconsistency
Testis (186)	2	30, 36	21	11.5	1.83	1.13–2.79	0.15
Bladder (188)	2	18, 30	31	29.9	1.04	0.70–1.47	0.67
Kidney (189)	3	18, 30, 35	11	18	0.61	0.30–1.09	0.69
Brain and nervous system (191–192)	3	18, 30, 35	19	15.4	1.23	0.74–1.93	0.84
Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (200–202)	1	36	4	2.2	1.82	0.49–4.65	—
Hodgkin's disease (201)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Multiple myeloma (203)	—		—	—	—	—	—
Leukemia (204–208)	4	18, 25, 30, 36	18	12.9	1.4	0.82–2.21	0.36

Note. Codes of the International Classification of Causes of Death (9th Revision) in parentheses; published data for references 48–50 in Howe and Birch.[4]

*Meta analysis completed only for two or more studies.

†Reference 36 is a combination of colon and rectum cancers.

TABLE 3
Mortality and Incidence Studies for Case–Control/Mortality Odds Ratio Studies

	Outcome	References	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval
All cancers (140–209)	Mortality	14	1.10	1.10–1.20
Buccal cavity and pharynx (140–149)	Mortality	14	5.90	1.90–18.30
Esophagus (150)	Mortality	14	0.90	0.70–1.30
Stomach (151)	Mortality	14	1.20	0.90–1.60
Colon (153)	Mortality	14	1.00	0.90–1.20
	Incidence	22*	1.04	0.59–1.82
Rectum (154)	Mortality	14	1.10	0.80–1.60
	Incidence	22*	0.97	0.50–1.88
Liver/gallbladder (155–156)	Mortality	14	1.20	0.90–1.70
Pancrease (157)	Mortality	14	1.20	1.00–1.50
	Incidence	22*	3.19	0.72–14.15
Larynx (161)	Mortality	14	0.80	0.40–1.30
Lung (162)	Mortality	14	1.10	1.00–1.20
	Incidence	22*	1.30	0.84–2.03
Skin (172–173)	Mortality	14	1.00	0.50–1.90
Malignant melanoma (172)	Mortality	14	1.40	1.00–1.90
	Incidence	22*	1.38	0.60–3.19
Prostate (185)	Mortality	14	1.20	1.00–1.30
Testis (186)	Incidence	29	4.00	0.70–27.40
Bladder (188)	Mortality	14	1.20	0.90–1.60
	Incidence	22*	2.11	1.07–4.14
Kidney (189)	Mortality	14	1.30	1.00–1.70
	Incidence	33	4.89	2.47–8.93
Brain and nervous system (191–192)	Mortality	14	1.00	0.80–1.40
	Incidence	22*	1.52	0.39–5.92
Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (200, 202)	Mortality	14,15†	1.41	1.10–1.70
	Incidence	22*	3.27	1.19–8.98
Hodgkin's disease (201)	Mortality	14	2.40	1.40–4.10
Multiple myeloma (203)	Mortality	14	1.10	0.80–1.60
	Incidence	17	1.90	0.50–9.40
Leukemia (204–208)	Mortality	14	1.10	0.80–1.40
	Incidence	22*	2.67	0.62–11.54

*Two control groups available; police rather than state employees selected as most comparable. Significance difference only for malignant melanoma when using state employees odds ratio and 95% confidence interval was 2.92 (1.70–5.03).

†Mortality odds ratio (mOR) calculated only for non-Hodgkin lymphoma as only case–control study with at least two studies. mOR estimated based primarily on larger sample in Ma et al.[14]

TABLE 4
Likelihood of Cancer Risk Among Firefighters After Employing Pattern of Meta-relative Risk Association, Study Type, and Inconsistency Among Studies

	Criteria 1							Criteria 2		Criteria 3	
	Pattern of Meta-relative Risk Association										
Cancer Site	mSMR	mPMR	mSMR and PMR	mRR	mSIR	mOR	Likelihood of Cancer Risk	Study Type	Likelihood of Cancer Risk	Inconsistency	Likelihood of Cancer Risk
Buccal	+	NA	NC	NC	+	–	Possible	No change	Possible	No change	Possible
Stomach	–	NA	NC	+	++	–	Probable	Down one	Possible	No change	Possible
Colon	++	+	++	–	–	–	Probable	No change	Probable	Down one	Possible
Rectum	+	NC	++	NC	+	–	Probable	Down one	Possible	No change	Possible
Skin	–	++	++	NC	NC	–	Probable	Down one	Possible	No change	Possible
Malignant melanoma	–	++	–	NA	+	–	Probable	Down one	Possible	No change	Possible
Prostate	+	NA	NC	–	++	–	Probable	No change	Probable	No change	Probable
Testis	NC	NA	NC	NA	++	–	Possible	No change	Possible	No change	Possible
Brain	+	+	+	+	+	–	Possible	No change	Possible	No change	Possible
Non–Hodgkin's lymphoma	+	NC	++	NA	NC	++	Probable	No change	Probable	No change	Probable
Multiple myeloma	++	++	++	NA	NA	–	Probable	No change	Probable	No change	Probable
Leukemia	–	+	+	NC	+	–	Possible	No change	Possible	No change	Possible

Pattern of meta-relative risk: "++" meta-relative risk is significant at the 5% level and >1.1; "+" meta-relative risk is not significant at the 5% level but >1.1; "–" meta-relative risk is ≤1.1 and not significant at the 5% level.
NA indicates no available studies; NC, not able to calculate because only one study of that type available.
Study type: down one level, the meta-relative risk (++) is based primarily on mPMR studies and/or negative (–) mSMR studies.
Inconsistency among studies: down one level, heterogeneity significant among all combined studies at the 10% level.

ethnicity, a positive family history, and may be influenced by diet. Although the positive association with prostate cancer may be due to some of these factors, it is unlikely that these entirely explain the findings; most studies analyzed white men adjusting for age. The summary risk estimate was 1.28 (95% CI = 1.15–1.43). The mSIR was significantly elevated, and all individual studies showed excess SIR values. Parent and Siemiatycki,[61] in a review article, concluded that there was suggestive epidemiologic evidence for prostate cancer associated with exposure to pesticides and herbicides, metallic dusts, metal working fluids, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon, and diesel engine emissions. Certainly firefighters are exposed to these latter two agents. Recently, exposure to complex mixture in the semiconductor industry also has been associated with an increase in prostate cancer.[62] Thus, it is possible that some of the mixed exposures experienced by firefighters may be prostate carcinogens. Ross and Schottenfeld[63] have cautioned, however, against associating occupational exposures with prostate cancer.

Although there were only four studies evaluating testicular cancer, we propose upgrading the likelihood of cancer risk from possible to probable. This upgrade is suggested because testicular cancer had the largest summary point estimate (2.02, 95% CI = 1.30–3.13) as well as consistency among the one SMR study, two incidence studies, and one case–control study showing elevated risk estimates between 1.15 and 4.30. Testicular cancer is the most common malignancy between the ages of 20 and 34. Except for cryptorchism, no risk factor has been clearly demonstrated.[64] Because testicular cancer occurs among younger men with high survival, mortality studies are less germane. Bates et al[30] showed an increase in the incident cases of testicular cancer with firefighter exposure duration as follows: 10 years:

TABLE 5
Summary of Likelihood of Cancer Risk and Summary Risk Estimate (95% CI) Across All Types of Studies for All Cancers

Cancer Site	Likelihood of Cancer Risk by Criteria	Summary Risk Estimate (95% CI)	Comments
Multiple myeloma	Probable	1.53 (1.21–1.94)	Consistent with mSMR and PMR (1.50, 95% CI = 1.17–1.89) Based on 10 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Non-Hodgkin lymphoma	Probable	1.51 (1.31–1.73)	Only two SMR and another PMR studies Slightly higher than mSMR and PMR (1.36, 95% CI = 1.10–1.67) Based on eight analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Prostate	Probable	1.28 (1.15–1.43)	Consistent with mSIR (1.29, 95% CI = 1.09–1.51) Based on 13 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Testis	Possible	2.02 (1.30–3.13)	Slightly higher than mSIR (1.83, 95% CI = 1.13–2.79) Based on four analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Skin	Possible	1.39 (1.10–1.73)	Slightly lower than mSMR and PMR (1.44, 95% CI = 1.10–1.87) – derived on basis of PMR studies Based on eight analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Malignant melanoma	Possible	1.32 (1.10–1.57)	Slightly higher than mSMR and PMR (1.29, 95% CI = 0.68–2.20) Based on 10 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Brain	Possible	1.32 (1.12–1.54)	Slightly higher than mSMR and PMR (1.27, 95% CI = 0.98–1.63) Based on 19 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level; there was heterogeneity among SMR studies
Rectum	Possible	1.29 (1.10–1.51)	Slightly lower than mSMR and PMR (1.39, 95% CI = 1.12–1.70) Based on 13 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Buccal cavity and pharynx	Possible	1.23 (0.96–1.55)	Slightly higher than mSMR (1.18, 95% CI = 0.81–1.66) Based on nine analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Stomach	Possible	1.22 (1.04–1.44)	Lower than mSIR (1.58, 95% CI = 1.12–2.16) Based on 13 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Colon	Possible	1.21 (1.03–1.41)	Slightly lower than mSMR and PMR (1.31, 95% CI = 1.08–1.59) Based on 25 analyses Heterogeneity—significant at the 10% level; there was heterogeneity among SMR and PMR studies
Leukemia	Possible	1.14 (0.98–1.31)	Similar to mSMR and PMR (1.14, 95% CI = 0.92–1.39) Based on eight analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Larynx	Unlikely	1.22 (0.87–1.70)	Higher than mSMR (0.58, 95% CI = 0.25–1.15) Based on seven analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Bladder	Unlikely	1.20 (0.97–1.48)	Similar to mSMR and PMR (1.24, 95% CI = 0.83,1.49) Based on 11 analyses Heterogeneity—significant at the 10% level; there was heterogeneity among SMR studies
Esophagus	Unlikely	1.16 (0.86–1.57)	Higher than mSMR (0.68, 95% CI = 0.39–1.08) Based on eight analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Pancreas	Unlikely	1.10 (0.91–1.34)	Slightly higher than mSMR (0.98, 95% CI = 0.75–1.26) Based on 13 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Kidney	Unlikely	1.07 (0.78–1.46)	Similar to mSMR and PMR (1.23, 95% CI = 0.94–1.59) Based on 12 analyses Heterogeneity—significant at the 10% level; there was heterogeneity among SMR studies

(*Continued*)

TABLE 5
Continued

Cancer Site	Likelihood of Cancer Risk by Criteria	Summary Risk Estimate (95% CI)	Comments
Hodgkin's disease	Unlikely	1.07 (0.59–1.92)	Higher than mSMR (0.78, 95% CI = 0.21–2.01) Based on three analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Liver	Unlikely	1.04 (0.72–1.49)	Similar to mSMR (1.00, 95% CI = 0.63–1.52) Based on seven analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level
Lung	Unlikely	1.03 (0.97–1.08)	Similar to mSMR and PMR (1.05, 95% CI = 0.96–1.14) Based on 19 analyses Heterogeneity—not significant at the 10% level; there was heterogeneity among PMR studies
All cancers	Unlikely	1.05 (1.00–1.09)	Similar to mSMR and PMR (1.06, 95% CI = 1.02–1.10 Based on 25 analyses Heterogeneity—significant at the 10% level; there was heterogeneity among SMR studies

CI indicates confidence interval; SMR, standardized mortality ratio; PMR, proportional mortality ratio; SIR, standardized incidence ratio.

SIR = 1.39, 95% CI = 0.2–5.0; 11 to 20 years: SIR = 4.03, 95% CI = 1.3–9.4. In those exposed greater than 20 years, the risk estimate remained elevated but declined (SIR = 2.65, 95% CI = 0.3–9.6), possibly because testicular cancer generally occurs at a younger age. Bates et al[30] argued that, although the reason for the excess risk of testicular cancer remained obscure, the possibility that this is a chance finding was low because incident studies are likely the most appropriate methodology for a cancer that can be successfully treated.

The 1990 findings of Howe and Burch[4] showing a positive association with brain cancer and malignant melanoma are compatible with our results because both had significant summary risk estimates. Brain cancers were initially scored as probable but then downgraded to possible (Table 5). There was inconsistency among the SMR studies, which resulted in the use of the random-effects model, yielding confidence limits that were not significant (SMR = 1.39, 95% CI = 0.94–2.06) (Table 2). This inconsistency primarily resulted from the Baris et al study,[13] a 61-year follow up of 7789 firefighters demonstrating a marked reduction in brain cancer (SMR = 0.61, 95% CI = 0.31–1.22). As noted in Table 4, however, there were elevated, but not significant, risk estimates across all studies, ie, mSMR, mPMR, mRR, and mSIR. This consistency is all the more remarkable given the diversity of rare cancers included in the category "brain and nervous system." Furthermore, there was a 2003 study by Krishnan et al[65] published after our search that examined adult gliomas in the San Francisco Bay area of men in 35 occupational groups. This study showed that male firefighters (six cases and one control) had the highest risk with an odds ratio of 5.93, although the confidence intervals were wide and not significant. In addition, malignant melanoma was also initially scored as probable but was downgraded to "possible" due to study type. This study downgrade was related to the negative SMR (−) and reliance primarily on a PMR study. Thus, in conclusion, our study supports a probable risk for multiple myeloma, similar to Howe and Burch's[4] findings, and a possible association with malignant melanoma and brain cancer.

Summary

We implemented a qualitative three-criteria assessment in addition to the quantitative meta-analyses. Based on the more traditional quantitative summary risk estimates shown in Table 5, 10 cancers, or half, were significantly associated with firefighting. Three cancers were designated as a probable risk based on the quantitative meta-risk estimates and our three criteria assessment. These cancers included multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and prostate. A recommendation is also made, however, for upgrading testicular cancer to "probable" based on the twofold excess summary risk estimate and the consistency among the studies. Thus, firefighter risk for these four cancers may be related to the direct effect associated with exposures to complex mixtures, the routes of delivery to target organs, and the indirect effects associated with modulation of biochemical or physiologic pathways. In anecdotal conversations with firefighters, they report that their skin, including the groin area, is frequently covered with "black soot." It is noteworthy that testicular cancer had the highest summary risk estimate (2.02) and skin cancer had a summary risk estimate (1.39) higher than prostate (1.28). Certainly, Edelman et al[3] at the World Trade Center, although under extreme conditions, revealed the hazards that firefighters may encounter only because air monitoring was performed.

As noted in Table 1, approximately half of the studies used local, regional, or national general population rates as the comparison group. These general population comparison groups raise concern that the actual risk of cancer may be underestimated due to the healthy worker effect related to the strict physical entry requirements, maintenance of better physical fitness, and good health benefits. The healthy worker bias may be less pronounced, however, for cancer than for conditions such as coronary heart disease. Furthermore, tobacco is unlikely a contributing factor because cancers known to be associated with smoking such as lung, bladder, and larynx were designated as unlikely and corresponding summary risk estimates were not statistically significant.

These findings of an association of firefighting with significant increased risk for specific types of cancer raise red flags and should encourage further development of innovative comfortable protective equipment allowing firefighters to do their jobs without compromising their health. Studies are especially needed that better characterize the type and extent of exposures to firefighters.

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