



Police Officer Injuries: Cause & Effect

Law enforcement is a dangerous occupation, as police officers are at an elevated risk of sustaining certain work-related injuries. Every shift, officers may be subjected to situations that might be fatal or cause significant injury, impacting their physical well-being, emotional state, family status, and may cause short or long-term disabilities or eventually an early retirement. Long-term job duty exposures include physical altercations and assaults, over-exertion, lifting, heat and cold exhaustion, sprains and strains, motor vehicle accidents, traffic control encounters, exposure to hazardous substances, and mental and emotional stress including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Our police department members understand these risks and the importance of developing enhanced safety programs and procedures to improve the safety, health, and protection of officers. The following are the causes and effects of the most frequently occurring injuries to police officers.

Physical Altercations and Assaults

Police officers may encounter the risk of being struck by or against objects due to physical altercations and assaults. When dealing with individuals who are attempting to escape or avoid arrest, emotions can escalate rapidly leading to violent, combative confrontations. In addition, suspects under the influence of alcohol or drugs can escalate physical situations. These altercations can result in injuries such as bruises, sprains, fractures, traumatic head injuries, cuts, or lacerations. Police officers who can maintain a high level of situational awareness can identify these conditions and implement non-physical controls such as conflict resolution and de-escalation procedures, or less-than-lethal protective weaponry.



Exertion: Sprains/Strains

The physical demands of police work, including running, jumping, twisting, lifting, chasing, and restraining individuals expose officers to the risk of strain and sprain-type injuries. In addition, over time repetitive motions can lead to chronic pain and long-term musculoskeletal issues. This can affect an officer's overall health and job performance. Controls against such injuries include:

- Maintaining good physical condition but knowing your limitations
- Using team lifting when applicable
- Having situational awareness for chases occurring in limited-light or no-light conditions
- Maintaining body control
- Practicing good lifting techniques

Exposure to Hazardous Substances

Police officers may encounter hazardous substances such as bloodborne pathogens like blood, saliva, vomit, or needlesticks, drugs, chemicals, or biological agents. Exposure to these substances can lead to chronic viruses, diseases, respiratory problems, skin irritations, or more severe health issues. Officers should use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for the situation. For example, in a methamphetamine laboratory, use a self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) and skin protection. Where bloodborne pathogens are a concern, utilize face masks, and gloves. Have access to fresh air when in the presence of hazardous chemicals and keep a fire extinguisher when flammables are present.

Traffic Incidents

Navigating through traffic while responding to emergencies or pursuing suspects is an integral part of a police officer's duty. Unfortunately, this exposes them to the risk of traffic accidents. Collisions can result in severe injuries, ranging from whiplash to more life-threatening outcomes. It is important to always wear a seatbelt when in a cruiser, don high visibility clothing when outside the vehicle, avoid distractions behind the wheel, and stay at the ready so no situation is a surprise.

Mental and Emotional Stress

While not a visible injury, the mental health stress on police officers is a significant concern. Constant exposure to traumatic events, violence, and high-stress situations can contribute to serious mental health conditions. These conditions include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, which can affect an officer's well-being. Practice stress-reducing approaches including getting adequate sleep, maintaining a healthy diet, enjoying off-duty activities, and adopting a good exercise routine.

Workplace injuries can be a major strain on law enforcement operations. The daily challenges police officers face show the dangers of law enforcement as a profession. Whether mental or physical, take the time to review the injury potential and preventative measures with your police department staff to reduce the effects of these risks on police officers.