

Don't Skimp on Any Details for Your SCBA and Turnout Gear

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By Frank R. Myers

One of the most important things firefighters can do is assure that our personal protective equipment (PPE) is in perfect condition. There is no room to skimp or overlook any details when performing your job functions. The moment that damage occurs, which is inevitable for our job description, we must assure that we get our PPE replaced or repaired so we can return to service and continue to provide protection not only for the public but also for ourselves.

Turnout gear is obviously the first layer of protection that we don when called to respond. To start off, the way we store our gear is important. It should be "hanging" in your locker when off duty. Avoid keeping it "crumpled" up as occurs when pants are pulled down over our boots for rapid response. Keep gear away from windows/sunlight. Paying attention to these details helps curtail degradation of the firefighting protection qualities/treatment included in the gear.

One item that requires special attention is storing your gear when placed on the truck. Usually, all crew members except the driver keep their gear inside the cab. When specifying compartments on your trucks, be sure that cross contamination does not occur. For example, drivers should not keep their gear where the fuel for the power tools are kept or in an area that will have fumes. This also applies to other types of gear, such as skin diving masks, goggles, safety glasses, etc. Use extra caution to assure that transverse compartments don't have their contents/fumes/contaminants travel to the other compartments.



Stock vehicles may have compartments that are transverse compartments. A simple piece of metal/aluminum can be secured to cover or block those areas that may have this issue. Understanding that transverse compartments have their advantages for “long” tools or items, just be sure to specify where the gear will be stored and that these contamination issues do not occur.

Other crew members need to assure that their gear is secured and will not become flying projectiles if the vehicle becomes involved in an accident. Keep the jacket and helmet “off” the ground. Firefighters’ shoes can bring in a lot of contaminants; therefore, keeping stuff off the floor will help to assure that cross contamination does not occur. Even though during the day members will enter and exit the vehicle, take the extra step to clean the floors—not just by sweeping, but with the use of soap and water. Specify that the truck floors are sealed so you can “spray” out the floor area with a hose and water.

It has been pretty much proven that firefighter contamination can occur from long-term exposure or recurring contamination (e.g., donning and doffing turnout gear that remains dirty and has not been washed after a fire). The mentality of the dirty/weathered/sooty gear showing one’s experience and time on the job is a thing of the past. We need to get into the mentality of regular cleaning and maintenance, especially after a fire. Granted, we can get contaminated from that one-time event. However, history has shown that firefighters are becoming afflicted with medical issues because of long-term exposure.

Turnout gear manufacturers can provide resources for regular maintenance, inspection, and cleaning of your turnout gear and SCBA’s. Your department needs to track these “preventive” events to assure that items will perform when needed. It is also advantageous in case an incident or accident were occur to a member. The subsequent investigation will definitely require the history and documentation.

The other advantage to documenting maintenance and history is that it can catch any “trends” that may be occurring if more than one member or members begin to experience similar signs/symptoms/illnesses. There is **tracking software** available that can specifically track your department’s PPE.

The resources must be in place so that members can get damaged, unrepairable items replaced immediately. We have seen the new trend of providing firefighters with two sets of turnout gear. A policy must be in place that during normal hours, members must be allowed to get PPE items replaced, Monday through Friday. If two sets cannot be provided, have a “buddy” system in place so that two members have access to each other’s gear. This is especially helpful on weekends and holidays.

Having a rolling schedule to assure that the **truck is “super” cleaned** aids in keeping contamination to a minimum. Having sanitizer on the vehicle, not only for surfaces but for your crew’s hands and gear, is advantageous. Obviously, latex gloves are a must.

Make sure an SOP is in place to assure that gear and SCBA are secured and not allowed to come in contact with any other contaminants after an incident.

The rules have changed over the years, hopefully for the better. We all need to learn and know that there is no compromise when it comes to our members' safety. Rules need to be followed, or else we cannot move forward or accomplish ongoing and preventive safety for members.

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