



POLICE

PATROL

5 Tips for Better Officer Wellness

Many officers die young from preventable disease. The steps you take to preserve your health now will prevent you from joining their ranks.

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See how these 5 tips can help you stay healthier. Source: POLICE

A [2017 study](#) conducted by the COPS office of the Department of Justice looked at 55 years of data on deaths of police officers—specifically police officers versus the general population—and found that a significantly higher percentage of officers die of cancer and heart disease.

The report from the study's authors reads in part: "Officer deaths from all malignant neoplasms or cancer combined were significantly higher than deaths in the general population. Likewise, deaths from all diseases of the circulatory system were significantly higher than deaths in the general population."

The report indicated that during the period of the study 46% of officers who died were killed by [cardiovascular disease](#)— 35% died of cardiovascular disease by the age of 60 years old. The average age of death for an officer was 68, somewhat below that of the general population.

Preserving your physical and [mental well-being](#) while serving in a law enforcement career so that you can retire healthy and happy is not easy.

Here are some tips and tactics I've collected over the years from officers who

have lived well and long and successfully—and conversely, sadly, some who did not. Prayers from me to members of both of those groups.

1. Eat Well

Shift work can truly stink in terms of finding [something decent to eat](#) for breakfast, lunch, or supper. Of course, no cop on-duty I've ever known calls those [meals](#) those names—it's "chow" or "break" or "mess" or some other words not particularly suited to publication in this fine publication.

Skip the McD and the BK and the other fast food joints. You probably work four days a week. On the third day of your days off, make a ridiculous wok full of chicken or pork or beef, add in some veggies, do a pot of rice, and when you're done portion those into little Tupperware bins and pop them in the freezer. You'll have a shift meal for every day you work that week oh, and while you're at it, having a couple of hard-boiled eggs in the cooler in the trunk of the car can be mighty handy).

You get a pass on a couple of slices of pizza every so often when you're 10-7—it's close to sacrilege to stop eating pizza from that local place down on Main Street where the sweet old lady has been behind the cash register since you were 12 years old.

2. Sleep Well

Shift work kills sleep, especially if your shifts keep getting shifted around. In June you're on days, in September you're on nights. You have no idea what you'll be doing in March of next year. Sleeping properly can be immensely challenging given those circumstances. Your "body clock" has been "reset" so many times it doesn't really know when it's time for bed or time to get up and get going with the "day."

Some cops I know tell me that stretching and some form of "yoga" is helpful. Some tell me to shut down the TV, computer, tablet, and phone at least an hour before the head hits the pillow.

Figure out a routine that helps you get proper rest off duty, because it will give you proper strength when you go 10-8.

3. Stop Smoking Right Now

Not a lot of cops smoke anymore, but if you do—stop. I quit a year ago, and it was not easy. I was a smoker for nearly 30 years. Two beers into the evening on a Friday I desperately wanted to pull on a cigarette. I didn't do the "patch" or the "gum" or anything like that, I used sheer force of will. One of the enduring characteristics of just about every cop I've ever met is sheer force of will.

So stop smoking. It will be one of the most difficult things you will ever do, but you will thank yourself sometime down the road.

4. Maintain Hobbies and Activities

Too many officers get caught up so tightly in the spokes of the job that they forget that they have a really nice mountain bike with pretty nice spokes mothballed under a tarp in the garage. Maybe it's been a year since that thing has seen the light of day. Fishing poles lie dormant—let alone the interest on the part of the owner to fill out the online form to renew the license to even drop a bobber on the water from the end of the dock.

"Off-duty activities" include making sure that the family unit—spouse, offspring, parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and even that strange woman who married your brother—know that they're loved. You don't have to buy everybody flowers or a beer at the pub or anything like that. But a quick phone call will fill their hearts and fill yours as well.

Whatever it is that takes you away from the job for a little time, do it—and keep doing it—as long as it's safe. No riding that Harley without a helmet.

5. Keep Your Faith

I don't like going to church, even though as a young person I was an altar boy and an attendant in the clergy house. I was never abused or mistreated; I just

fell out of love with the "organized" religion. But I have two cherished bibles in my home—one at my bedside and one on the side-table next to my Lazy-Boy recliner. Spending some time just reading those texts in a quiet space can be rejuvenating. I'm a Christian, but any other true faith can ease your heart after a long duty shift.

The old saying is that there are no Atheists found in foxholes. Many of you have been in "foxholes" in the military and many others in life-and-death situations in civilian law enforcement.

For my part, I've raced into a burning building and raced back out with a two-year-old girl. Raced into the Atlantic Ocean at Jones Beach back in New York and swam back out with a mid-30s guy who was in the process of drowning to death.

Until those two moments I'd never put my lips to a two year-old girl or a mid-30s dude. But as I did the CPR and the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, my head and my heart were full with prayer. Both survived

There are myriad ways you as police officers can improve your health. Get a regular check-up at the doctor or the dentist. Go to a marriage counselor with your spouse to ensure that the family unit is healthy. Go to the golf course and dust off those filthy Callaways you got for your birthday 15 years ago. Go for a run. Heck, while you're at it, infiltrate the academy and do the challenge course with those young whipper-snappers who will one day be your backup officers.

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