



Department of
Veterans Affairs

Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses:

Questions & Answers



GULF VETS

Q. Is there a "Persian Gulf Syndrome" or "Gulf War Syndrome"?

A. These are terms that have been used by the news media and some veterans and their families to describe symptoms and illnesses reported by individuals who served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in Southwest Asia in 1990-91. Several panels of highly respected non-government scientists have carefully reviewed available information about the possible environmental and toxic exposures of Gulf War veterans and the illnesses they later experienced. The experts concluded that while Gulf War veterans suffer from real illnesses, there is no single disease or unique medical condition affecting Gulf War veterans. Most Gulf War participants with medical problems examined in military or VA health care facilities have many different but common conditions that can be diagnosed and effectively treated.

Q. What symptoms are Gulf War veterans reporting ?

A. Many of the 76,000 Gulf War veterans participating in the VA Gulf War Registry health examination program have commonly reported that they suffer from a wide range of symptoms, including fatigue, skin rash, headache, muscle and joint pain, memory loss and difficulty concentrating, shortness of breath, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal problems, and chest pain. Studies show that Gulf War veterans report symptoms 2-3 times more frequently than service members who were not deployed. Some Gulf War veterans have multiple health problems; others are in good or excellent health.

Q. What is VA doing to help veterans of Desert Shield and Desert Storm ?

A. VA is helping Gulf War veterans in many different ways. VA offers Gulf War Registry health examinations, special eligibility medical care at no cost to veterans, and disability compensation (for veterans with service-connected conditions). VA vet centers offer counseling for veterans. VA has an active outreach program to share information with Gulf War veterans and other interested individuals regarding medical developments, benefit changes, and related matters. VA is also conducting scientific research to learn more about the causes of and treatments for the health problems of these veterans.

Q. What is the Gulf War Registry examination program? How can a veteran participate?

A. This is a comprehensive medical examination program offered at VA medical centers across the Nation for veterans who served on active duty in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the Gulf War. Veterans who choose to participate are asked about their medical

history, their experiences in the Gulf War, including possible exposures to environmental hazards, and health problems they have had since returning from the Gulf region. They receive a complete physical examination. Basic laboratory tests are performed on blood and urine. If medically indicated, veterans may receive more specialized tests and consultations. All veterans who complete the examination program are given the results.

Q. What happens to the information gathered in the registry examination program ?

A. Even though the registry examination program was never intended or designed to be a scientific study, the findings of all the examinations are combined and analyzed for clues that could lead to future research. The results of each examination are included in the veteran's permanent medical record and may help support a claim for disability compensation. As of July 31, 1999, more than 76,000 Gulf War veterans have completed the registry health examination.

Q. Can an ill Gulf War veteran get medical treatment at VA for his or her medical problems?

A. Yes. VA provides high-quality medical care for Gulf War veterans. In 1993, at VA request, Congress enacted Public Law 103-210, giving Gulf War veterans special eligibility for VA health care for medical conditions possibly related to their Gulf War experience. Since then, almost 240,000 Gulf War veterans have been seen at VA outpatient clinics and more than 23,000 Gulf War veterans have been hospitalized in VA health care facilities.

Q. Can the spouses and children of Gulf War veterans get free medical examinations?

A. Yes. To be eligible to participate in this VA-funded effort, an individual must

- (1) be the spouse or child of a veteran (a) listed in the VA registry, and (b) suffering from an illness or disorder;
- (2) be suffering from, or may have suffered from an illness or disorder (including a birth defect, miscarriage, or stillbirth) which could be connected to the veteran's service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations; and
- (3) have granted VA permission to include in the registry medical information from the evaluation.

Eligible individuals can apply by calling the VA Gulf War Veterans Helpline at 1-800-PGW-VETS. This is an examination program only. VA is not authorized to provide medical treatment or follow-up evaluations for illnesses found during these examinations. Program participants (or in the case of children, the parents) are advised of the examination results and, where appropriate, advised to seek medical treatment elsewhere. The program was implemented by VA in 1996 and is now authorized through December 31, 1999. Pending legislation would extend the program.

An alternative VA program exists for spouses and children of Gulf War veterans to enter their medical information into the Gulf War Registry. Eligible family members may have their private physicians complete a registry code sheet containing the protocol examination information and submit it to VA for entry into the database. However, all expenses related to completion of the examination and the code sheet are the responsibility of the veteran or family members. For information about this alternative examination program for Gulf War veterans' spouses and children, contact the Registry Coordinator at your nearest VA medical center.

The Department of Defense (DoD) Comprehensive Clinical Examination Program is available to spouses and children of DoD beneficiaries.

Information gathered during these examinations are combined and analyzed for clues that could lead to research efforts.

Q. What happens if a veteran has symptoms that cannot be diagnosed by doctors at the local VA medical center?

A. While most veterans can be diagnosed and treated at their local VA medical center, some have conditions that are unusual and difficult to diagnose. Sometimes this requires continued testing and observation by a team of specialists. The local VA physician may refer these veterans to a special VA Gulf War referral center. At these four national centers, veterans undergo more extensive medical evaluations that require approximately one to two weeks. Additional laboratory studies may be done, as well as consultations with other specialists. The medical work-up and treatment recommendations are individualized for each veteran depending on his or her medical condition.

Q. How can a veteran get referred to one of these special centers ?

A. The decision to transfer a veteran to a referral center is made by the veteran's VA physician in consultation with a referral center physician director. Veterans interested in a referral should talk to their local VA physician. In the first six years of this program about 600 Gulf War veterans have been admitted to the referral centers.

Q. What VA research is going on regarding Gulf War veterans' illnesses ?

A. VA is committed to investigating all possible causes and treatments for health problems in troops who served in the Gulf War. The President has declared that federal researchers should "leave no stone unturned" in the search for answers to the questions raised by Gulf War veterans and their families about the long-term health effects of military service in the Gulf War. In 1993, President Clinton asked the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to take the lead in coordinating all federally-sponsored Gulf War-related research.

VA, along with the Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services also are pursuing important research efforts. In total, 145 federally-funded projects have been started. Some have already been completed and published. Important VA research projects include a long-term mortality study of Gulf War veterans, and a national health survey of Gulf War veterans and their families. In 1994, VA established three national environmental hazards research centers. These centers are exploring the possible health consequences of military service in the Gulf War. Some projects are relatively small, while others involve thousands of participants.

Researchers are considering many possible causes including, but not limited to, oil well fires, vaccinations, infections, chemicals, pesticides, microwaves, depleted uranium, pyridostigmine bromide, and chemical and biological warfare agents. All potential causes are receiving serious consideration and appropriate investigation. Epidemiological studies are comparing the health of Gulf War veterans with Gulf War-era veterans who were not deployed to the Gulf region. In 1996, VA established a fourth environmental hazards research center which is focusing on reproductive health related to military service.

Q. What is depleted uranium (DU), and why are Gulf War veterans concerned about exposure to it?

- A.** DU is derived from the heavy metal uranium which occurs naturally as mineral deposits which are mined and processed for use in nuclear power plants or nuclear weapons. In recent years, the U.S. Armed Forces used DU in the manufacture of projectiles and armor. DU is used in anti-tank munitions because of its highly effective penetrating capabilities and as armor plate due to its extremely dense properties. DU is nearly twice as dense as lead. During the Gulf War, munitions containing DU were used for the first time. Some Gulf War veterans involved in "friendly fire" incidents, or in cleaning vehicles destroyed by DU munitions, may have been exposed to DU.

While information on the health effects of DU exposure in military settings is limited, data from studies of uranium miners reveal that these miners are at increased risk for kidney and respiratory problems. These miners were exposed to other toxic substances plus their exposure occurred over extended periods. Thus, their experiences are significantly different from Gulf War veterans.

VA encourages Gulf War veterans who are concerned about their possible exposure to DU and the long-term health consequences of such exposure to contact the nearest VA medical center for an examination.

Q. What is VA's view on Gulf War veterans' exposure to chemical warfare agents ?

- A.** VA has carefully listened to veterans who expressed concern about exposure to chemical warfare agents in the Gulf War. VA has always acknowledged the possibility that Gulf War veterans were exposed to chemical warfare agents. In 1993, VA began including questions about possible exposure to chemical warfare agents as part of the Registry medical examination.

In 1996, VA learned that Gulf War participants who were involved in the demolition of an Iraqi ammunition storage facility known as Khamisiyah in southern Iraq in March 1991, may have been exposed to nerve agents sarin and cyclosarin. In July 1997, DoD reported that a CIA computer model revealed that although no U.S. personnel experienced noticeable health effects from the release of these chemical agents, about 98,900 U.S. troops may have been exposed to very low levels of the agents. A recent large-scale Navy study of hospitalization records indicated that Gulf War veterans possibly exposed to nerve gas were no more ill than other Gulf War veterans.

Unfortunately, there is no valid diagnostic test to identify chemical warfare agent exposure that occurred years ago. Although the technology to do this does not now exist, research is continuing in the chemical exposure area. Gulf War veterans with health problems possibly related to chemical exposures are provided needed care, without charge to them, at VA medical centers across the Nation.

Q. Is an infectious agent making Gulf War veterans ill?

- A.** Many fewer infectious diseases occurred during the Gulf War than in any previous war. However, in 1991, a small number of Gulf War veterans returned from Southwest Asia with infectious diseases that have been diagnosed and treated. Infections with viruses, mycoplasma, microsporidia, and various bacteria are among the agents hypothesized but not conclusively shown to be related to chronic multi-symptom illnesses experienced by many Gulf War veterans. Extensive medical testing by the DoD, VA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and academic medical centers has not found a link between infectious agents and the chronic, as yet unexplained, illnesses of Gulf War veterans. Nevertheless, numerous peer reviewed scientific studies are underway to investigate this matter further. Although some physicians offer treatment for various hypothesized infectious agents, the medications used are costly, have many adverse health effects, and have not been scientifically shown to be curative.

Q. What treatment is effective for the symptoms that some Gulf War veterans are experiencing ?

- A.** Although neither a cause or single underlying disease process has been identified, VA is dedicated to studying and

treating the ailment that they are suffering. Recently, VA identified groups of patients who may benefit from possible therapies. VA and DoD are conducting two major studies for the symptoms of the undiagnosed illnesses of Gulf War veterans. One of these studies will test whether exercise and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT)--separately or in combination--improve physical function. CBT teaches patients active techniques for reducing the severity of symptoms and is commonly used to enhance traditional treatment for many chronic conditions. The second treatment trial will test whether an antibiotic is effective in treating the illnesses reported by some Gulf War veterans. One theory is that the infection with the microorganism *Mycoplasma fermentans* cause the symptoms that veterans are reporting. Some veterans say the antibiotic doxycycline helps to treat their conditions, but a large-scale scientific study as needed to properly test this therapy. A study is under way.

Q. Do the children of Gulf War veterans have an increase in birth defects?

- A. While we do not now have a conclusive answer to this important question, this possibility is being thoroughly investigated. The available information does not indicate that the children of Gulf War veterans are at increased risk of birth defects.

In June 1997, the New England Journal of Medicine published a large study of the risks of birth defects among children of Gulf War veterans. Researchers evaluated the routinely collected data on all live births at 135 military hospitals in 1991, 1992, and 1993. Records of more than 75,000 newborns were reviewed for any birth defect and for defects defined as severe on the basis of specific diagnoses and the criteria of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

During the study period, 33,998 infants were born to Gulf War veterans and 41,463 to non-deployed veterans at these hospitals. Investigators found that the overall risk of any birth defect and the risk of severe defects was similar to those reported in civilian population. Furthermore, there was no significant association for either men or women between service in the Gulf War and the risk of any birth defect or of severe birth defects in their children.

The VA's national health survey of Gulf War veterans and their families is in progress. Phase I, a survey of 15,000 Gulf War veterans and a comparison group of 15,1300 Gulf-era veterans who were not deployed to the theater of operations was completed in August 1996. Phase II consists of 8,000 telephone interviews and a review of 4,000 medical records. Phases I and II are complete with an overall response rate of 70 percent. In September 1998, Phase III began with initial examinations for 1,000 randomly selected deployed and non-deployed veterans and their families at 17 VA medical centers. Investigators hope to learn a great deal

about the problems experienced by the offspring of Gulf War veterans from this survey.

In November 1996, VA established an Environmental Hazards Research Center at the VA Medical Center in Louisville, KY, specifically to focus research on the potential reproductive and development hazards of military service. The Center's overall goal is to determine whether exposures to hazardous substances affects reproductive health of causes developmental abnormalities in the children of veterans.

Q. Can a veteran be compensated for illnesses related to Gulf War service ?

- A. Yes. Gulf War veterans who have illnesses that developed in or made worse during their military service should file a claim for disability compensation. Completing the Gulf War Registry health examination is not the same as filing a claim for compensation. Veterans benefits counselors, located at all VA regional offices and many VA medical centers, can provide the application and any needed assistance. In 1994, at VA request, Congress enacted Public Law 103-446, allowing VA to pay compensation to Gulf War veterans with certain chronic disabilities resulting from illnesses VA could not diagnose that appeared during active duty in the Gulf War or within a presumptive period after Gulf War service which led to a degree of disability of 10 percent or more. For additional information on disability compensation and other VA benefits, call toll-free: **1-800-827-1000.**

Q. How can a Gulf War veteran, family member, or other interested person keep up-to-date on scientific developments, legislation, and related matters ?

- A. VA's Gulf War Review (originally called the Persian Gulf Review) newsletter provides such information. Veterans who are part of the Gulf War Registry automatically are mailed this periodical. Anyone who would like to be added to the mailing list, should send his or her name and address to the following address:

VACO, Gulf War Review
Environmental Agents Service (131)
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

A great deal of information is also available on the world wide web. The VA Gulf War veterans' home page can be accessed at [http://www.va.gov/gulf, htm](http://www.va.gov/gulf.htm). Gulf War veterans who are unsure about what to do, or who need to know how to contact the nearest VA Medical Center, can call toll-free the VA Gulf War Veterans Information Helpline:

1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)