

MILITARY SERVICE IN THE AFGHANISTAN WAR

**Questions & Answers
about Health Concerns of Veterans
and Their Families**



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Q. What health issues do scientists and medical people expect following the return of veterans of the war in Afghanistan?

A. We expect to see a wide range of health problems in veterans returning from the war against terrorism underway in Southern Asia, currently focused in Afghanistan. We anticipate many of the same problems experienced by veterans of previous conflicts. The kinds of health problems that arise after the war will depend on the size of this combat deployment. The number of military and civilian peacekeepers needed to assist in relief and re-construction efforts also will influence health care needs.

Q. How many individuals are involved in this deployment?

A. To date, over 30,000 male and female troops are involved in this deployment. The air and sea campaign is being waged from three aircraft carriers and two Marine amphibious assault ships off the coast of Pakistan. Bombing missions also are being carried out by Air Force bombers flying from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and from the continental United States.

In addition to the air campaign, ground troops have been deployed to Afghanistan and parts of the former Soviet Union neighboring Afghanistan. The first U.S. troops to operate in Afghanistan were special forces. Conventional ground troops began moving into southern Afghanistan on November 25, 2001. In addition to the combat troops, about 50,000 Reserve personnel have been called to active duty; these troops have provided support for operations in South Asia.

Q. How many U.S. troops are actually in Afghanistan?

A. As of early January 2002, of the 30,000 mentioned above, only about 4,000 individuals are actually in Afghanistan. The remainder are in countries neighboring Afghanistan, at sea, on the Island of Diego Garcia, in Kuwait, or elsewhere.

Q. What will be the impact of recent Federal legislation and changes in the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense on veterans of the Afghanistan war?

A. VA has extended health care benefits for those veterans who have served in combat. Based on what was learned from veterans from previous conflicts, VA also has developed new programs for providing treatment and other assistance to those veterans.

In 1998, VA was authorized to provide a broad range of health care services to U.S. veterans who served on active duty in a designated theater of combat operations. Such veterans are eligible for 2 years after leaving the military for VA hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care for any illness, even if there is insufficient medical evidence to conclude that their illness was a result of their combat service (see Public Law 105-368, Section 102, codified at Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 1710(e)((1)(D))).

This law means that combat veterans will have access to high-quality health care at VA medical facilities for 2 years, based on their service in combat, without having to prove that their health problems may be related to their combat service or to toxic exposures during their active service. For locations of VA medical facilities, check the telephone book, or www.va.gov, or call 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Q. What are the major health risk factors do these veterans face?

A. Deployed troops will be at risk for infectious diseases endemic to this region. These include viral hepatitis (A and E), and malaria. Other troops will return with traumatic . injuries. There also may be injuries caused by exposure to extremely cold temperatures. As in all wars, troops will suffer from the health effects that result from surviving a life-threatening experience

Q. What other health problems are common to this area?

A. Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan are high risk countries for infectious diseases and high altitude illnesses. Besides viral hepatitis and malaria, diseases that some veterans may encounter include typhoid fever, and diarrheal diseases such as cholera, all acquired by consuming contaminated food and water; insect-borne disease such as malaria, dengue fever, Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever, leishmaniasis, West Nile virus, sand fly fever and louse-borne typhus, acquired through the bites of various insects and ticks; tuberculosis acquired from person-to-person respiratory transmission; leptospirosis from exposure to contaminated water; rabies from animal contact; and sexually transmitted diseases. High altitude problems include cold injuries and respiratory disorders.

Q. What impact has the living conditions in Afghanistan had on the transmission of diseases?

A. The combination of food shortages, inadequate public health infrastructure, substantial refugee movement, and increased gatherings of malnourished people significantly increase the likelihood of infectious disease transmission. Overcrowding associated with cold weather and congregations of displaced persons are highly conducive to the transmission of respiratory diseases such as diphtheria, tuberculosis (TB), measles, and influenza. TB rates in Afghanistan are among the world's highest.

Q. Are the children of veterans of the war in Afghanistan at increased risk of birth defects?

A. The evidence now available does not suggest an increased risk. The Department of Defense now maintains a birth defects registry for deployed troops that is designed to answer this question for future deployments, including to Afghanistan.

Q. Does VA offer health examinations for the spouses and children of the veterans of the War in Afghanistan?

A. VA's authority to provide health care is limited by law to veterans themselves.

Q. Will some veterans return home with difficult-to-diagnose health problems?

A. Yes, we expect that some troops will return with difficult to explain symptoms. As occurred following the Gulf War and earlier wars, there have been questions about the causes of various symptoms among troops after more recent deployments. Unique deployment-related illnesses have been suggested to explain unusual symptoms or syndromes. History reveals that concerns over chronic physical symptoms have arisen after prior military conflict.

Q. What should a veteran who served in the Afghanistan War do if he or she is concerned about possible long-term health consequences of military service in Southern Asia?

A. Veterans of the war on terrorism are welcome to contact the nearest VA medical center for a thorough and comprehensive medical examination. There is no charge to the veteran for this examination. Veterans can identify the location of the nearest VA medical center in their local telephone directory under "U.S. Government." In most areas, veterans can call 1-800-827-1000 (toll-free) for information about VA benefits.

Q. What if the local VA medical center cannot diagnose a veteran's medical problems?

A. In 2001, VA established two Centers for the Study of War-Related Illnesses to handle these unusual situations. Veterans who are referred by their VA doctor to these clinics will receive continued testing and observations on an in-patient basis by an inter-disciplinary team of experts. This in-depth, extensive evaluation takes about seven days.

Q. Is VA or DoD conducting research to learn more about the health problems of veterans who served in the war in Afghanistan?

A. Yes. Research is ongoing or planned by the Centers for the Study of War-Related Illnesses and elsewhere in VA and DoD to gain a better understanding of the health problems and concerns of these veterans.

Q. What about disability compensation for disabled veterans?

A. Veterans who have an illness that developed in or worsened during their military service in Afghanistan (or elsewhere) are encouraged to file a claim for disability compensation. For information regarding VA benefits, they can call a VA veterans service representative. These representatives, who are located at all VA regional offices and many VA medical centers, can provide an application and any needed assistance. The toll-free telephone is 1-800-827-1000. For VA compensation information on the internet, contact: <http://www.vba.va.gov/bin/21/>. For an on-line application for VA benefits, contact: <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp>.

Q. Where can an Afghanistan War veteran, family member, or other interested person get accurate information about the medical problems of veterans who served in Afghanistan?

A. For additional information, contact the nearest VA medical center or the Environmental Agents Service (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC. For health benefit information, call toll-free 1-877-222-8387. The web site information regarding health benefits and services is <http://www.va.gov/vbs/health/>.