



Department of
Veterans Affairs

Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses: Questions & Answers



GULF VETS

2003 EDITION

Q. Is there a “Persian Gulf Syndrome” or “Gulf War Syndrome”?

A. These are terms that have been used by some scientists, the news media and some veterans and their families to describe the wide variety of symptoms and illnesses reported by individuals who served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in Southwest Asia in 1990-91, and in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. Several panels of highly respected independent non-government scientists have carefully reviewed available information about the possible environmental and toxic exposures of Gulf War veterans and the illnesses some veterans later experience. Experts conclude 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 veterans with medical problems who are examined in military or VA health care facilities have common conditions that are diagnosed and effectively treated.

Q. What health problems are Gulf War veterans reporting?

A. Many of the more than 86,000 Gulf War veterans participating in the VA Gulf War Registry health examination program report that they have a wide range of common 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. While studies show that Gulf War veterans report symptoms 2-3 times more frequently than service members who were not deployed as well as increased birth defects in their children, carefully constructed scientific investigations have not shown that Gulf War veterans are suffering greater rates of death and hospitalization. Studies on birth defects among children of Gulf war veterans show inconsistent findings.

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

A. VA is helping Gulf War veterans in many different ways. VA offers high quality health care, special eligibility medical care at no cost to veterans, and disability compensation (for veterans with service-connected conditions), including for veterans with undiagnosed illnesses. VA Vet Centers offer counseling and other services for veterans. Through our newsletter and Web site, 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 also sponsors scientific research to learn more about the causes of and treatments for these veterans' health problems.

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 many 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. About 300,000 Gulf War veterans have been seen at VA outpatient clinics and more than 33,000 Gulf War veterans have been hospitalized in VA health care facilities.

Q. Can 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

- be the spouse or child of a veteran (a) listed in the VA registry, and (b) suffering from an illness or disorder;
- 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
- 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. Participants are told about the examination results and, where appropriate, advised to seek medical treatment elsewhere. Amendments, enacted several years ago, allow VA to be more flexible in authorizing the examination. Coordinating VA facilities may authorize individuals to obtain examinations at the affiliated medical school or from their private physician (under a "fee basis" arrangement) or at the nearest VA medical center. If the examination is performed at VA, no monetary reimbursement will be authorized. The program was implemented by VA in 1996, and is now authorized through December 31, 2003.

Eligible family members may alternately have their private physicians complete the registry examination, and submit it to VA for entry into the database. However, all expenses related to completion of the examination 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 Environmental Health 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. This problem is seen with any large group of patients, including American civilians. Sometimes this

requires continued testing and observation by a team of specialists. For VA patients, the local VA primary care physician may refer them to a special VA program known as the War Related Illness and Injury Centers (WRIISC). In 2001, these centers replaced the Gulf War Referral Centers for extensive medical evaluations on an inpatient basis. The examination and treatment 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 WRIISC is made by the veteran's VA primary care physician in consultation with a WRIISC physician director. Veterans interested should talk to their local VA physician. About 800 Gulf War veterans have gone to one of the WRIISCs or to a referral center. For additional information, go to our Web site at www.va.gov/enviroagents.

Q. What research is VA doing on Gulf War veterans' health?

A. VA is actively involved in and 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, the President 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 are cooperating on Gulf War research. In total, 224 federally-funded projects (costing about \$213 million) have been started. Most of these studies have already been completed and published, but many are ongoing. 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.

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. For more information, see our Web site at www.va.gov/gulfwar.

Q. What are the health effects of depleted uranium (DU)?

A. DU comes 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.

Information on the health effects of DU exposure in military settings is limited. However, the National Academy of Sciences recently concluded that it is unlikely that most Gulf War veterans could have been harmed by DU at the exposure they had during the Gulf War.

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. For more information on this subject, see www.va.gov/gulfwar.

Q. What are the health effects from exposure to chemical warfare agents during the Gulf War?

A. VA has heard from veterans who are concerned about health effects from exposure to chemical warfare agents in the Gulf War.

In 1996, VA learned that Gulf War U.S. service members 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 showed that about 98,900 U.S. troops might have been exposed to very low levels of the agents. In December 2000, DoD sent letters to about 140,000 Gulf War veterans with the results of new exposure modeling data. The new information suggested that about 100,000 veterans may have been exposed but not all the same individuals identified in 1997. DoD also found that there were no actual reports of poisoning by these nerve agents during the release at Khamisiyah.

A large-scale Navy study of hospitalization records indicated that Gulf War veterans possibly exposed to nerve gas at Khamisiyah were no more ill than other Gulf War veterans. DoD investigators report that Khamisiyah is the only site where Gulf War veterans may have been exposed to this agent.

Unfortunately, there is no valid test to identify chemical warfare agent exposure that occurred years ago. Gulf War veterans with health problems possibly related to chemical exposures are provided needed care, without charge, at VA medical centers across the Nation.

There is no evidence that U.S. military personnel were exposed to chemical weapons during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Q. Is a “bug” making Gulf War veterans ill?

A. Few infectious diseases occurred during the Gulf War compared to any previous war. However, in 1991 and in 2003, 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 some 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 any infectious agents and the chronic, unexplained, illnesses of Gulf War veterans. 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 cure any disease.

Q. What treatment helps the symptoms that some Gulf War veterans are experiencing?

A. Although neither a cause or single underlying disease has been found, 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 researchers found that for the symptoms of the undiagnosed illnesses of Gulf War veterans, exercise and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) can 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.

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.

A more recent study, published in 2003, in the journal *Birth Defects Research*, provides a great deal of information of this subject. This study looked at the prevalence of birth defects among infants of Gulf War veterans in Arkansas, Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, and Iowa. The study was conducted at the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego, CA, and was funded by the U.S. military. It reported greater rates of 5 birth defects out of the 48 studied defects among infants of male and female Gulf War veterans, including certain heart and kidney defects.

That study also reported greater rates of a birth defect in which the urethra terminates in an abnormal position in the penis, but

only among infants conceived by female Gulf War veterans. In contrast to a few specific defects, the “overall” rate of birth defects was not higher among Gulf War veterans.

The Navy researchers acknowledged in their publication certain limitations of their study, including an inability to determine if the excess birth defects were caused by inherited or environmental factors, or were due to chance from various causes.

Also, most previous similar studies have shown no statistically significant increase in birth defects among children born to Gulf War veterans.

The DoD-funded, Navy study does **not** provide solid proof that Gulf War veterans are at higher risk of birth defects because the results could easily have resulted from chance alone. However, the findings of this study may become important if corroborated by a soon to be completed VA study. VA’s Environmental Epidemiology Service, is currently validating the findings from the VA National Survey of Gulf War veterans using birth records. The VA study should be completed by the end of this summer. Also, research is being conducted in Great Britain to assess the risk of birth defects in their population of Gulf War veterans’ offspring; the results of this study are expected to be published later in 2003. We are hopeful that ongoing research will provide firm answers to the questions raised.

The possibility of an increased risk of birth defects is a difficult and emotional issue for military veterans because the consequences of a birth defect are so terrible. The Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes the importance of the new Navy study of birth defects, and that it addresses a concern which many combat veterans have expressed. While it is not a definitive study, it raises serious questions, which must and will be addressed by on-going research studies.

At present, the Department of Veterans Affairs does not have the authority to provide medical treatment to the children of Gulf War veterans. In those cases where VA provides treatment, for example to children with spina bifida born to Vietnam veterans, it required special legislative authority from Congress.

The VA’s National Health Survey of Gulf War veterans and their families is in progress. It involves about 15,000 Gulf War veterans and a comparison group of approximately 15,000 Gulf-era veterans who were not deployed. Investigators hope to learn much more about the problems experienced by the offspring of Gulf War veterans from this survey.

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 service representatives, 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.

In 2001, Public Law 107-103, expanded the definition of “qualifying chronic disability.” That legislation classified fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and irritable bowel syndrome as disabilities for which compensation can be paid on a presumptive basis. VA encourages veterans with these conditions – including those previously denied service connection before the enactment of this legislation – to apply for compensation benefits.

For information about VA benefits and services for Gulf War veterans call the helpline toll-free: **1-800-749-8387**. 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, address, and Social Security number to the following address:

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

The *Review*, including back issues, is available on-line at the VA Gulf War web site listed below.

A great deal of information is also available on the World Wide Web. Please see the VA Gulf War veterans’ home page at **<http://www.va.gov/gulfwar>**.

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)