

1ST DISTRICT SERVICE OFFICER VA & R REPORT FOR JULY 2022



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After nearly 30 years of trying to prove a theory that an environmental toxin was responsible for sickening roughly 250,000 U.S. troops who served in the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, Dr. Robert Haley says new research confirms that sarin nerve gas caused Gulf War Illness. Following the Gulf War, nearly one-third of all who deployed reported unexplained chronic symptoms such as rashes, fatigue, gastrointestinal and digestive issues, brain "fog," neuropathy, and muscle and joint pain. Federal agencies spent years broadly dismissing the idea that troops may have been suffering from exposure to chemical agents, with many veterans experiencing symptoms sent to mental health providers. But a study published last week in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* used genetic research and survey data to determine that U.S. service members exposed to sarin were more likely to develop Gulf War Illness, and those who were exposed and had a weaker variant of a gene that helps digest pesticides were nine times more likely to have symptoms. The study found that those who reported hearing nerve agent alarms and who also had the least robust form of the gene had a nine-fold chance of having Gulf War Illness. Those with a genotype that is a mix of the two variants had more than four times the chance of having Gulf War Illness, while those who just heard nerve agent alarms, which the researchers used as a proxy for exposure, raised the chance of developing the condition by nearly four times, although to a lesser degree of those who have a mix of genes.

Did you know many veterans are receiving interactive VEText appointment reminders? Every enrolled veteran with a cell phone number listed in their health record is automatically enrolled in the program. For you to participate, make sure that your local medical center has your current phone numbers. You may update your phone numbers during check-in at your next appointment, use the self-service kiosks located throughout VA facilities.

Some types of cancer and other diseases are known to have a connection to Agent Orange exposure decades ago during service in Vietnam. The ones with the strongest, presumptive connection in the eyes of the VA are on a compiled list of "presumptive conditions." However, there is an additional level of analysis for disability claims related to Agent Orange exposure. It's referred to as Secondary Service Connected conditions. In other words, veterans may have medical or psychological conditions that are not directly connected to Agent Orange exposure, but are secondary to those conditions. For example, if you have radiation treatment for a cancer caused by Agent Orange, any conditions caused by the radiation treatment may be considered secondary service-connected; if you hadn't been exposed to Agent Orange, you probably wouldn't have had the cancer that necessitated the radiation treatment, and therefore wouldn't have the condition caused by that treatment.

Lawmakers have reached a bipartisan agreement on a historic expansion of health care and disability benefits for millions of veterans exposed to toxic chemicals during their military service. Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., and committee ranking member Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., announced in a Wednesday morning statement that they have reached an agreement on what they called "the most comprehensive toxic exposure package the Senate has ever delivered to veterans in this country's history." "For far too long, our nation's veterans have been living with chronic illnesses as a result of exposures

during their time in uniform," they added. "Today, we're taking necessary steps to right this wrong with our proposal that'll provide veterans and their families with the health care and benefits they have earned and deserve."

Malignant mesothelioma is a rare and deadly form of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. It is largely linked to occupational exposure to the carcinogen, and many of its victims worked with insulation or construction materials, or in high-heat settings. One group of those exposed to asbestos are the former employees of rubber factories in Akron, Ohio. A recent report published by The Center for Public Integrity has exposed the disregard with which these employees were treated. Thousands of mesothelioma and asbestosis claims have been filed against Johns Manville Corporation over the years, citing their asbestos products as the source of their illnesses. According to the report, Akron-based Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, General Tire, B.F. Goodrich, and Firestone all purchased asbestos from the company and other suppliers for both manufacturing purposes and to insulate their factories. Lawsuits filed by workers recall asbestos floating in the plants "like snowflakes," adhering to their skin and clothing, and attorneys representing them point to photos of workers with no respiratory protection handling asbestos. Over the years, more than 2,000 mesothelioma and asbestosis claims have been settled by Johns Manville, which filed for bankruptcy in 1982. The payments distributed by the \$80 million national asbestos trust fund and the workers' compensation claims filed against the rubber companies have been small, ranging from \$8000 to barely more than \$20,000, and a judge discussing the process said, "The shame of it is that the families wait a very long time for a very small amount of money. You want to see justice being done. And I don't know that waiting 20 years for \$1,200 is justice."

Did you know Total Disability Individual Unemployability (TDIU) requires a service-related disability have a VA rating of at least 60 percent? Or, if the veteran has more than one form of disability, one should be at least 40 percent with a total combined rating of 70 percent or higher. The serviceman or woman must also be unable to maintain substantial employment because of their service connected disabilities. Odd jobs or other forms of marginal employment do not count, so long as income is not substantial. Did you know if you have previously applied for TDIU and been denied, you can appeal or re-apply? There is no limit on how many times a veteran can apply for TDIU benefits. While the VA does not require applicants to hire a TDIU benefits lawyer, having qualified representation can ensure your rights are protected.

Times have changed for veterans experiencing mental health disorders. In the past, it was often thought that if you couldn't "see" an injury, it didn't exist. Thankfully, the VA now recognizes service-connected conditions like anxiety, depression, and adjustment disorder. Each of these can have a profound impact on your ability to live your day-to-day life and work. Despite this, veterans are still sometimes denied the benefits they need and deserve. If anxiety, depression, and/or adjustment disorder is preventing you from working, you need to make sure you are maximizing your benefits.

Vietnam veterans with illnesses that they believe were incurred or aggravated by exposure to Agent Orange or other aspects of military service - contact a VA veterans services representative at the nearest VA Regional Office or health care facility and apply for disability compensation. The counselors have information about the wide range of benefit programs administered by VA. The national toll-free number is 1-800-827-1000. Vietnam veterans seeking disability compensation for illnesses incurred in or aggravated by military service also may wish to call VA's Special Issues Helpline at 1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387).

Did you know the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) eliminated the annual requirement for most veterans enrolled in VA's health care system to report income information? Instead, VA will automatically match income information obtained from the Internal Revenue Service and Social Security

Administration. This change will reduce the burden on veterans, improve customer service and make it much easier for veterans to keep their health care eligibility up-to-date. However, some veterans applying for enrollment for the first time are still required to submit income information. There is no change in VA's long-standing policy to provide no-cost care to indigent veterans, veterans with catastrophic medical conditions, veterans with a disability rating of 50 percent or higher, or for conditions that are officially rated as "service-connected." VA encourages veterans to continue to use the health benefits renewal form to report changes in their personal information, such as address, phone numbers, dependents, next of kin, income and health insurance. For more information call VA toll-free at 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Military veterans who say they were sickened by lingering amounts of the herbicide Agent Orange aboard repurposed airplanes after the Vietnam War now have some strong scientific support for their claims. A new study has found that veterans who were exposed to aircraft that had previously sprayed Agent Orange over Vietnam during the war may have been exposed to dioxin levels above Department of Defense (DoD) standards for maximum permissible exposure to poisonous chemicals.

Check-in for your next VA appointment might be different next time you come in. Beginning this summer, some VA facilities will allow veterans to do one or both of these: Start the check-in process up to seven days in advance of the appointment. Check in at the clinic using your smartphone on the day of your appointment. As part of how VA is modernizing the way veterans receive care, VA received extensive feedback from veterans and caregivers about how the checking-in process can be made better, especially for those who use assistive technologies to access their benefits online.

In case you forgot, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) still continues to distribute disability benefits to Vietnam Veterans who qualify for compensation under established liberalized rules for Agent Orange exposure. Up to 200,000 Vietnam Veterans are potentially eligible to receive VA disability compensation for medical conditions recently associated with Agent Orange. The expansion of coverage involves B-cell (or hairy-cell) leukemia, Parkinson's disease and ischemic heart disease.

Did you know the Senate took a major step toward broadening America's commitment to take care of sick veterans, passing a Bill to offer new health care and tax-free disability benefits to as many as 3.5 million veterans on an 84-14 vote? Under the legislation written by Veterans' Affairs Chairman Jon Tester, D-Montana, and ranking member Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) would consider a veteran with any of 23 conditions, ranging from brain cancer to hypertension, who was deployed to a combat zone during the wars in Iraq or in Afghanistan automatically eligible for care at government cost, based on the presumption that exposure to toxic chemicals in the war zone caused the ailments.



Please Remember..... That all gave some, but many gave all!