Veterans, Military Service, and Cancer Risk

There are approximately 40,000 new cancer cases in Veterans reported annually. As the Veteran population continues to age, this number will continue to rise. This is an unexpected risk of military service. A soldier likely doesn’t think about his or her risk of developing a life-threatening cancer, 20 years later, as a result of exposure to chemicals or radiation.

Exposure related cancers have been occurring in Veterans since WWI (with the use of nitrogen and sulfur mustard). Many WWII veterans were potentially exposed to radiation after the dropping of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Most have heard of Agent Orange, and its use as an herbicide during the Vietnam War. Agent Orange exposure has been linked to many types of cancer including lymphoma, Hodgkin lymphoma, multiple myeloma, lung cancer, prostate cancer and chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Gulf War Veterans may have a higher risk of lung and brain cancers; possibly as a result of exposure to nerve gas, smoke from burning oil wells, and pesticides, though this service connection is still being researched. Even more Veterans have been exposed to asbestos, putting them at a higher risk of developing mesothelioma and lung cancer. The link between service to our country and increased cancer risk is one that we cannot ignore.

Possible causes for increased cancer risk in veterans

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Exposure</th>
<th>Associated Cancers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Radiation (from nuclear bombs)</td>
<td>Bile duct cancer&lt;br&gt;Bone cancer&lt;br&gt;Breast cancer&lt;br&gt;Colon cancer&lt;br&gt;Esophageal cancer&lt;br&gt;Gall bladder cancer&lt;br&gt;Liver cancer&lt;br&gt;Pancreatic cancer&lt;br&gt;Pharynx cancer&lt;br&gt;Salivary gland cancer&lt;br&gt;Small intestine cancer&lt;br&gt;Stomach cancer&lt;br&gt;Thyroid cancer&lt;br&gt;Kidney cancer&lt;br&gt;Bladder cancer&lt;br&gt;Leukemia&lt;br&gt;Lymphoma (except Hodgkin disease)&lt;br&gt;Multiple Myeloma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ionized radiation (from nuclear powered ship/submarines)</td>
<td>All cancers</td>
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<td>Nerve gas/chemical weapons</td>
<td>Brain cancer</td>
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Veterans exposed to these agents can get help with healthcare and disability compensation.

**Healthcare**

Most Veterans qualify for some level of health care coverage. This coverage is dependent on their service history and/or injuries they may have sustained in combat or service. They must not have been dishonorably discharged from the service to be eligible. To start the application process:

- Call 1-877-222-VETS or go to [www.va.gov/healthbenefits](http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits).
- Be sure to have as much information about your military service as you can, as well as any potential exposures to cancer causing agents while you were serving.
- You do not need your DD214 (discharge summary) to apply for benefits. However, you can order one through [www.archives.gov/veterans](http://www.archives.gov/veterans).

**Disability**

The Veterans Administration (VA), presumes that many disabilities, including the cancers listed above, were caused by exposure during military service. This means that veterans and survivors of veterans with a cancer that is connected to service related exposure can collect disability compensation from the VA.

Apply for VA benefits

Learn more about veterans, exposure and cancer risk.