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*If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?*

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# POST-9/11 VET NEWSLETTER

INFORMATION FOR VETERANS WHO SERVED IN OPERATIONS ENDURING FREEDOM, IRAQI FREEDOM, AND NEW DAWN

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## GETTING THE MOST FROM THE BURN PIT REGISTRY: COMPLETING AN IN-PERSON MEDICAL EVALUATION

The Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry is the next generation in VA environmental exposure registries. Unlike other more established VA registries in which you begin by going to your VA medical center and completing a survey, or completing a survey over the telephone, you can join this registry online. During the survey process, Veterans and service members are asked to answer questions about their military service, exposures, and health history. This creates a snapshot in time of the participant's current health status. The information can be printed and shared with any health care provider.

To get the most out of the burn

pit registry, Veterans can do more than just participate in the registry online. The next step is for Veterans to schedule an appointment for a free medical evaluation with a local VA provider. This service is optional, but it can help a Veteran understand any possible health problems related to their deployment. Veterans can talk to a knowledgeable health care provider about their concerns related to airborne hazards and open burn pits. The exam is specific to each Veteran and focuses on their individual health conditions and concerns. The health information from the evaluation complements the registry data to create a complete picture of the Veteran's health status.

Veterans must contact an environmental health coordinator near them to schedule an appointment for a medical evaluation, since completing the registry online does not cue VA to call to schedule an exam. A list of environmental health coordinators and their contact information is available at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>. Service members can obtain a free health evaluation from a Department of Defense (DoD) provider.

As of September 6, 2017, 116,643 Veterans and service members have completed and submitted their registry questionnaire. However, only three percent have had the in-person health exam. Eligible Veterans and service members may complete the registry online

at <https://veteran.mobilehealth.va.gov/AHBurnPitRegistry/>, and then schedule a free health exam. Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations after August 2, 1990, or in Afghanistan or Djibouti, Africa, after September 11, 2001, are eligible to enroll.

Registries are not used for disability compensation or pension purposes. Information about disability compensation is available online at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/>. Additional information about the registry can be found at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>. Read about recent milestones reached by the registry on page 2.





## CARING FOR VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS EXPOSED TO CHEMICAL WARFARE AGENTS

As a part of an effort to identify and care for military personnel exposed to chemical warfare agents (CWA), the Department of Defense (DoD) interviewed service members and Veterans, including National Guard and Reserve component members, who may have been exposed to CWAs. DoD interviewed 5,818 individuals to assess their exposure to CWAs as of August 3, 2017, and this program remains open to new participants. CWAs include nerve agents (e.g., sarin), blister agents (e.g., sulfur mustard), and toxic industrial chemicals (e.g. chlorine). Service members may have been exposed while destroying or handling explosive ordnance, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), while serving in Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn between 2003 and 2011.

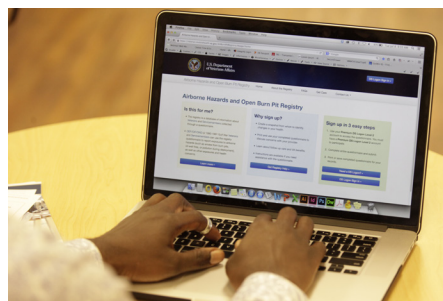


DoD offered a clinical assessment to the approximately 350 individuals found to have had confirmed or likely exposure to CWAs. DoD communicated the results of these clinical assessments to the affected individuals. VA's Veterans Benefits Administration plans to send a letter to each Veteran explaining the disability compensation process. A VA work group is planning how best

to provide services to these Veterans over the long term.

For more information on exposure to CWAs, visit [www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/chemical-warfare-agents-oif.asp](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/chemical-warfare-agents-oif.asp).

## THE BURN PIT REGISTRY: REACHING MILESTONES IN 2017



The Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry is a large database of self-reported information on deployment-related exposures to airborne health hazards, medical histories, and demographic information. Eligible Veterans and service members can participate by completing a survey online and then following up with a free in-person medical evaluation. The burn pit registry reached four important milestones in 2017:

1. In February, the registry surpassed 100,000 participants. As of September 6, 2017, there were 116,643 Veterans and service members enrolled in the registry.
2. June marked the third anniversary of the registry's inauguration in June 2014.
3. In January, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine issued an important Congressionally-mandated report: Assessment of the Department of

Veterans Affairs Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. The report is available online for free download at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2017/Assessment-of-the-VA-Airborne-Hazards-and-Open-Burn-Pit-Registry.aspx>. VA is reviewing the report's recommendations on making improvements to the registry.

4. In May, VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) held an invitation-only symposium to review the National Academies of Science report and to discuss collaborations in research, clinical care, policy, education, and outreach on airborne hazards exposures. Representatives from Veterans Services Organizations, including Veterans of Foreign Wars, The Sergeant Sullivan Circle, Burn Pits 360, and Disabled American Veterans, participated.

Are you interested in participating in the burn pit registry? Learn more about the registry, eligibility, and how to sign up: [www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp). If you have already completed the registry questionnaire online, schedule your free medical evaluation by contacting an environmental health coordinator.

### Registry Eligibility for Veterans with Service between 1990-1998

VA uses individual deployment history information provided by the Department of Defense to determine eligibility to participate in the registry. Deployment history from 1990-1998 is frequently incomplete. As a result, VA must manually review eligibility for some applicants. VA is working to streamline and accelerate the eligibility review process.

## THE BURN PIT REGISTRY: REACHING MILESTONES IN 2017

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## THE BURN PIT REGISTRY: REACHING MILESTONES IN 2017

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### How to Schedule a Free Medical Evaluation

1. Complete and submit the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry online questionnaire.
2. Contact the environmental health coordinator at your VA medical center <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>
3. Request a medical evaluation.
4. Print a copy of your completed questionnaire and take it to your provider.

To the right is a snapshot of self-reported information, including demographics and exposures, from participants in the registry.

## A Look at the Participants in the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry June 1, 2014 – June 1, 2017

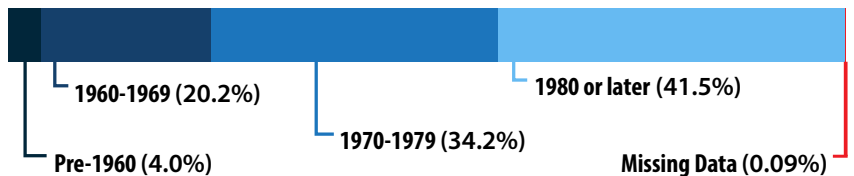
### Total participants:

109,000

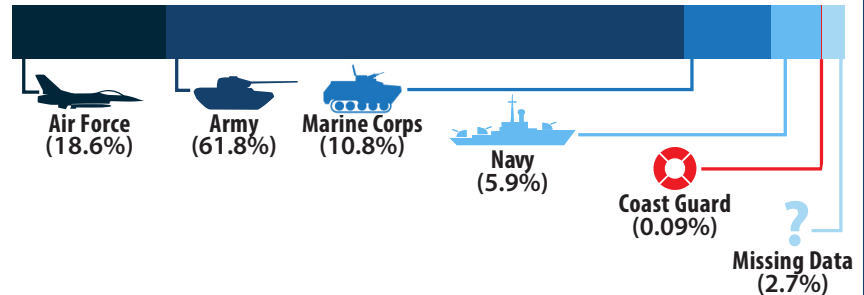
### Gender :



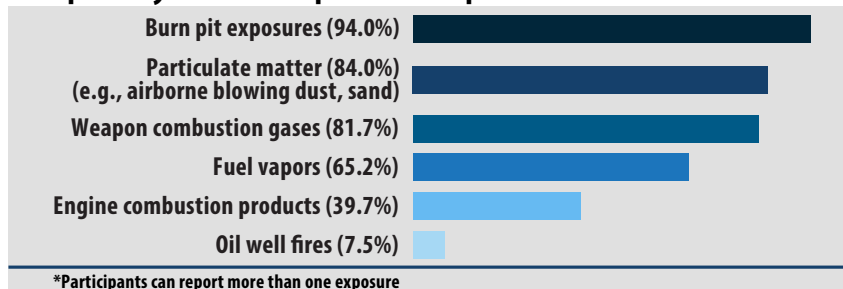
### Year of birth:



### Branch of service:



### Frequency of self-reported exposures\*:



\*Participants can report more than one exposure

### Medical evaluations completed:

Less than 3% of participants have completed the optional medical evaluation.





## MEDICAL SCREENING OF QARMAT ALI VETERANS

In 2009, VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) conducted a no-cost medical screening as a part of the Qarmat Ali Medical Surveillance Program. This program is designed for Veterans and Service members who guarded the Quarmat Ali Water treatment facility in the Basrah oil fields in Iraq during the spring and summer of 2003.

The Qarmat Ali Water treatment facility was contaminated with sodium dichromate, a chemical compound used in water treatment in the oil industry. Personnel performing guard duty at the treatment facility may have inhaled sodium dichromate dust. Sodium dichromate contains hexavalent chromium Cr (VI), a chemical known to cause medical conditions, including lung cancer, nasal and skin irritation, and respiratory problems.

In a review of the health status of screening participants, no abnormalities specific to hexavalent chromium exposure (e.g., nasal septum perforation) were found. Read a summary of the findings at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27046175>. VA and DoD are planning a second round of medical screening. Eligible Veterans will be notified by mail when the medical screening is available.



**CT Scan image of lungs.**



## FINDINGS ABOUT HEALTH FROM A LARGE SCALE SURVEY STUDY

The National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans is a large-scale study of Veterans who served during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (the deployed group), and Veterans who served elsewhere during the same time period (the non-deployed group). Researchers compared these two groups by asking scientifically selected individuals to complete a 16-page survey on their current health. In the survey, participants reported on a wide variety of their physical and mental health conditions, health behaviors, exposures, and military experience. In total, 20,563 Veterans from across the country participated between 2009–2011.

Researchers have been analyzing responses from the survey to learn about the health issues facing OEF/OIF-era Veterans. So far, researchers have focused on respiratory health, pregnancy and infertility, mental health, and cigarette smoking, and reported the following findings in scientific publications:

**Respiratory health:** Among both the deployed and the non-deployed Veterans, researchers found that the prevalence of at least one respiratory exposure, such as dust or sand, burning trash

or feces, or smoke from oil fires, was high (95 percent among the deployed Veterans and 70 percent among the non-deployed Veterans). Those with a respiratory exposure were at an increased risk of a respiratory disease among the entire study population.

Deployed Veterans were 29 percent more likely to report that they were diagnosed with sinusitis compared with non-deployed Veterans. Researchers found no significant difference in asthma or bronchitis between the deployed and non-deployed Veterans.

### **Pregnancy and infertility:**

Researchers looked at preterm birth, low birth rate, and macrosomia (high weight in a fetus) in pregnancies among non-deployed women and in pregnancies among women who had a baby before, during, and after deployment. The researchers found a greater risk of preterm birth in pregnancies among non-deployed women and in women who had their baby after deployment, compared to women who had a baby before deployment. Researchers found a

## FINDINGS ABOUT HEALTH FROM A LARGE SCALE SURVEY STUDY

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## FINDINGS ABOUT HEALTH FROM A LARGE SCALE SURVEY STUDY

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similar pattern for low birth rate. They found no association between deployment and macrosomia.

As many as 15.8 percent of women and 13.8 percent of men who participated in this study reported that they had experienced infertility. Infertility is defined as trying with a partner to get pregnant for more than 12 months. Infertility among the general population in the U.S. ranges from 8 percent to 20 percent, depending on the definition used.

**Mental health:** 13.5 percent of study participants screened positive for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—15.7 percent of the deployed Veterans screened positive for PTSD, and 10.9 percent of non-deployed Veterans screened positive.

For deployed and non-deployed Veterans combined, 41.5 percent of women and 4 percent of men experienced military sexual trauma.

**Cigarette smoking:** Among the deployed and non-deployed Veterans combined, 42.7 percent were non-smokers, 32.5 percent were current smokers, and 24.8 percent were former smokers. Compared to non-smokers and former smokers, a greater percentage of current smokers were 24-34 years old, earned less than \$35,000 per year, were separated or divorced, or never married or single.

Read more about the National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans, and find links to summaries of the research findings at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/studies/new-generation/index.asp>

## RESEARCHERS STUDY LUNG HEALTH IN DEPLOYED IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS

Researchers from the Airborne Hazards Center of Excellence at the New Jersey War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) help Veterans and VA to better understand the potential health effects of airborne hazards exposure. Recently, the team conducted a study on pulmonary (lung) function and lung diffusing capacity in deployed Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. Lung diffusing capacity is the lungs' ability to let oxygen to diffuse to the blood, and the ability for carbon dioxide to diffuse from the blood to the lungs.

Researchers reviewed records from 143 Veterans referred to the WRIISC for post-deployment health concerns. All of these Veterans had pulmonary function tests. More than 75% of the Veterans had normal lung volumes and spirometry (breathing capacity) tests. However,



**X-ray image of lungs.**

researchers also found an isolated reduction in lung diffusing capacity in 30% of the patients. An isolated reduction in lung diffusing capacity may be associated with underlying pulmonary disease.

To read a summary of the research findings, go to <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27614096>. Veterans with concerns about their respiratory health should talk to their primary health care provider.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COORDINATORS AND CLINICIANS : HELPING VETERANS CONCERNED ABOUT EXPOSURES

VA's environmental health registries include free medical exams for Veterans who may have been exposed to environmental hazards during military service. Veterans can have a comprehensive health exam, including an exposure and medical history, laboratory tests if needed, and a physical exam. These registries help VA understand the health of specific groups of Veterans. Registries can help Veterans become aware of their possible health problems related to environmental exposures. VA offers registries for Veterans with service after 9/11, including the Gulf War Registry and the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (an online registry and optional in-person medical evaluation).

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COORDINATORS AND CLINICIANS : HELPING VETERANS CONCERNED ABOUT EXPOSURES

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## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COORDINATORS AND CLINICIANS : HELPING VETERANS CONCERNED ABOUT EXPOSURES

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As a part of participation in a registry, an environmental health coordinator guides Veterans through the process of getting an exam, and the environmental health clinician performs the medical evaluation. Together, the coordinator and clinician can also answer questions about health concerns related to military exposures and direct Veterans to other VA services related to exposure concerns, such as benefits services.

Below is an introduction to an environmental health coordinator and environmental health clinician, and the work they do to facilitate registry exams for Veterans:

### **William Kingsberry – Environmental Health Coordinator**

William Kingsberry has been an environmental health coordinator at the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, GA for 13 years. He has worked at VA for 28 years, after serving in the U.S. Army for seven years.

Mr. Kingsberry receives requests for registry exams, contacts Veterans to let them know about the exams they will take, and sets up appointments for exams. He helps Veterans with the preliminary interview and worksheet needed before they start their exam.

"I explain everything to them and give them an appointment," said Mr. Kingsberry. "I let them know

what the registry is about. If they have any presumed illnesses, I'll ask them if they know where they can file a claim. If they don't know, I let them know, whether it is by telephone or the address to the nearest office they can go to, or I send them in the hospital where there are claims representatives."

Mr. Kingsberry mainly helps Veterans interested in the in-person health exams with the Gulf War Registry and the Agent Orange Registry. For Veterans interested in the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, he initially refers them to the web to complete the online portion of this registry.

### **Dr. Jerrold Flyer, Environmental Health Clinician**

Dr. Jerrold Flyer, Associate Chief of Staff, Non-Institutional Care, at the Boise VA Medical Center has been an environmental health clinician for almost seven years. He is a 30 year Veteran of the Air Force, with multiple deployments and service in Operating Enduring Freedom.

"My main role is to perform environmental registry exams on Veterans who are requesting enrollment into a specific registry," said Dr. Flyer. "I also serve as a resource regarding environmental



exposures for both Veterans and other clinicians." Dr. Flyer is the VISN 20 Lead Environmental Registry Clinician, and communicates information from VA's Central Office to the lead clinicians in VISN 20. VISN 20, the Northwest Health Network, includes the states of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and one county each in California and Montana.

Veterans can obtain assistance from environmental health coordinators and clinicians for any of the registries from which they qualify. Other VA registries and related programs include the Ionizing Radiation Registry, Depleted Uranium Follow-Up Program, and the Toxic Embedded Fragment Surveillance Center

VA encourages you to join a registry. To start the process, find an environmental health coordinator near you <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>.

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