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AGENT ORANGE NEWSLETTER

INFORMATION FOR VIETNAM-ERA VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

MESSAGE FROM DR. LOREN ERICKSON

Welcome to VA's 2019 Agent Orange Newsletter. As Chief Consultant for VA's Post Deployment Health Services and as both a Veteran and son of a Vietnam Veteran, I am happy to provide this latest newsletter for Vietnam Veterans.

This issue contains articles on environmental health registries and telehealth; the ionizing radiation registry; research on Vietnam Veterans' health; links to benefits information; and an update on registry eligibility for Blue Water Navy Veterans.

VA strives to provide up-to-date information on issues of concern for Vietnam Veterans. For the latest information, go to <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/index.asp> and click the links to topics of interest, including related diseases, benefits, research studies, and more.



Loren Erickson, MD, MPH, DrPH

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON COPD AMONG ARMY CHEMICAL CORPS VETERANS

Army Chemical Corps Veterans worked with tactical herbicides and may have had one of the highest levels of dioxin exposure during the Vietnam War. According to a 2013 study of these Veterans, there

was an association between their self-reported herbicide exposure and whether a health care provider told them they had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). COPD is a progressive respiratory disease that makes it hard to breathe. However, when the researchers tested the breathing airflow out of the lungs in a group of these Veterans using an objective method called spirometry, they found no association between reported herbicide exposure and COPD. Spirometry uses a device to check airflow out of the lungs.

Researchers looked at data collected from 3,193 Army Chemical Corps Veterans who participated in a study

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in which they answered questions on herbicide exposure and if they had ever received a COPD diagnosis from a doctor or other medical professional. Out of this group of Veterans, 403 Veterans also participated in spirometry tests.

The difference in results between a physician's diagnosis of COPD as reported by the Veteran and COPD determined using spirometry may



Example of an Electronic Spirometer

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RESEARCH FINDINGS ON COPD AMONG ARMY CHEMICAL CORPS VETERANS (CONTINUED)

be due to physicians' reliance on a Veteran's symptoms when making their diagnosis rather than on more objective methods like spirometry. Research shows that spirometry is underutilized by physicians even though it is one of the simpler diagnostic procedures doctors can perform to test your breathing. Additionally, approximately 10 – 30 percent of Veterans with no COPD

diagnoses from a physician were COPD-positive upon spirometry testing. This may show a need to reevaluate how diagnoses are made in clinical settings.

Read the abstract of this study at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30159906>. Learn more about the Army Chemical Corps Study at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/studies/vietnam-army-chemical-corps.asp>.

TELEPHONE RESOURCES

Health Care

1-877-222-8387

Benefits

1-800-827-1000

TDD (Hearing Impaired)

1-800-829-4833

BENEFITS RESOURCES

- Benefits Overview for Agent Orange Exposure
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/index.asp>
- Agent Orange Exposure Disability Benefits
<https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/agent-orange/>
- Health Care for Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/health-care.asp>
- Veterans' Diseases Associated with Agent Orange
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/conditions/index.asp>
- Agent Orange Registry Exam
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/registry-exam.asp>
- Benefits for Veterans' Children with Birth Defects
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/children-birth-defects.asp>
- Agent Orange and Survivor's Benefits
<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/survivors.asp>
- How to File a VA Disability Claim
<https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim>
- eBenefits (24/7 access to VA and Department of Defense benefits)
<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/homepage>





THE IONIZING RADIATION REGISTRY HEALTH EXAM

Veterans who served before, during, or after Vietnam may have been exposed to radiation from military activities including nuclear weapons testing. Radiation can be non-ionizing, which is low-energy radiation and comes from various sources, such as sunlight, microwaves, radio frequencies, and radar; or ionizing, which sends out high energy and may pose a health risk.

For Veterans who are concerned about possible long-term health problems related to potential exposure to ionizing radiation during their service, VA offers the Ionizing Radiation Registry health exam. The Ionizing Radiation Registry health exam includes an exposure and medical history, laboratory tests if needed, and a physical exam. A VA health professional will discuss the results face-to-face with participants and in a follow-up letter.

Eligible Veterans for the Ionizing Radiation Registry include:

- Veterans who participated on-site in a test involving the atmospheric detonation of a nuclear device, whether or not the testing nation was the United States;
- Veterans who participated in the occupation of Hiroshima or Nagasaki from August 6, 1945 until July 1, 1946;
- Prisoners of war in Japan during World War II;
- Receipts of nasopharyngeal (nose and throat) radium irradiation



treatments while in the active military, naval, or air service;

- Veterans involved in “radiation-risk activities” including:

- o Service at Department of Energy gaseous diffusion plants at Paducah, KY, Portsmouth, OH, or the K25 area at Oak Ridge, TN, for at least 250 days before February 1, 1992 under certain conditions;

- o Proximity to “Longshot,” “Milrow,” or “Cannikin” underground nuclear tests at Amchitka Island, AK, before January 1, 1974.

To get an Ionizing Radiation Registry exam, contact your local VA Environmental Health Coordinator (<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>) and set up an appointment. This exam is a no-cost exam. The Ionizing Radiation Registry is separate from the disability process, and Veterans interested in being considered for disability compensation still need to file a claim (<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/homepage>).

Learn more about radiation and Veterans health at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/radiation/index.asp> and about the Ionizing Radiation Registry at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/radiation/benefits/registry-exam.asp>.

VA ORLANDO PIONEERS TELEHEALTH TECHNOLOGY FOR ITS ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH REGISTRY EXAMS

VA offers several Environmental Health Registries including the Agent Orange Registry for Vietnam Veterans. These registries help Veterans learn about possible long-term health effects of environmental exposures during their military service, and include a no-cost health exam. Veterans can receive a registry exam at VA medical centers across the country.

Environmental Health Clinician, Dr. Katia Gugucheva, and her team recognized the demand for

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VA ORLANDO PIONEERS TELEHEALTH TECHNOLOGY FOR ITS ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH REGISTRY EXAMS (CONTINUED)

Environmental Health Registry Exams at the Orlando VA Medical Center. In 2010, the Orlando VAMC offered Agent Orange and Gulf War registry exams once a week. Under Dr. Gugucheva, they could offer more exams, and added telehealth services in 2018. The Orlando VAMC now conducts exams four days a week, including exams through telehealth technology, with plans to offer more registry exams through telehealth.

With telehealth technology, the Orlando VAMC offers virtual environmental health registry exams for Veterans in different locations in Central Florida. A Veteran can meet a nurse at a VA medical center nearest them and communicate with an Environmental Health Clinician at the Orlando VAMC via computer.

“Telehealth technology makes access to registry exams more convenient

and reduces travel times for Veterans, especially for those in rural areas with limited access to large VA health care facilities,” said Dr. Gugucheva.

How it works

A VA telehealth visit begins when the VA Video Connect app sends an e-mail to both the Environmental Health Clinician and the Veteran at their separate VA locations. The email includes a web link. When the clinician and Veteran click the web link, it takes them both into a virtual medical room on the computer. Then they can see each other, hear each other, and start their clinical session. This session is encrypted to ensure that it is secure and private.

A facilitator (usually a nurse) trained on the use of telehealth equipment is present with the Veteran. This allows the Environmental Health Clinician to conduct a complete physical examination using a virtual stethoscope, virtual otoscope, and close examination of any body part through zooming with the camera.

Telehealth availability is growing

The Orlando VAMC is leading the use of telehealth for registry exams. VA plans to make virtual exams increasingly available for more Veterans across the country. Any VA Environmental Health Registry exam is a potential candidate for telehealth services.


VA aims to have 75 percent of providers delivering telehealth services by the end of fiscal year 2019 and 100 percent of providers by the end of fiscal year 2021.

In addition to registry exams, the Orlando VAMC, under the expertise of Dr. Gugucheva, offers other environmental health services, such as providing information on health issues linked to Veteran’s deployments and garrison-related toxic exposures, and can consult with other experts as necessary.

Contact an Environmental Health Coordinator near you <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp> to find out about scheduling a registry exam, either onsite or virtual, and to learn about deployment-related exposures.




Katia Gugucheva, MD



AGENT ORANGE REGISTRY

Eligible Veterans who are concerned about possible long-term health problems related to Agent Orange exposure can participate in the Agent Orange Registry. This free exam includes an exposure history, medical history, physical exam, and laboratory tests, as necessary. A VA health care provider will discuss the results with you. Contact your local Environmental Health Coordinator to schedule an appointment for an Agent Orange Registry Health Exam.





RESEARCHERS USE INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATION TO IMPROVE SURVEY ON VIETNAM ERA VETERANS' HEALTH

The 2017 Vietnam Era Health Retrospective Observational Study (VE-HEROeS) is a survey that compares the health and well-being of U.S. Vietnam Veterans to other U.S. Veterans who served elsewhere during the same time-period, as well as to similarly aged members of the U.S. public without military experience. For this study, researchers mailed two similar sets of questionnaires for participants to complete, one for Veterans and the other for members of the U.S. public. Surveys for this study were developed with qualitative research. This involves interviewing techniques and observation to gauge perceptions and interpretation of questionnaire items, and receptivity to completing the questionnaire for both Veterans and members of the public. Improvements to the questionnaires made after qualitative testing can improve question wording, recall, and overall response quality and quantity.



Researchers interviewed 20 participants ages 60 years or older about how well they understood the VE-HEROeS survey questions and survey process. By interviewing respondents using predefined questions and observing the Veterans as they completed survey questions, the researchers obtained feedback to help them improve the flow of the survey and to make the questions clearer and easier to understand and answer. The researchers also observed participants to see how they reacted to other study materials, including the study's invitation letter.

This effort provided valuable information about how to improve the survey, especially for older Veterans, where issues related to

survey-taking and recall of their war-related memories or other sensitive topics may come into play.

The scientific article, "Qualitative Interviewing: Testing Health Surveys Among Vietnam War Veterans at Age 70" describes in more detail how the researchers used qualitative research to improve the VE-HEROeS survey questionnaires. Read more about this article at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331527105>

Researchers are now analyzing data from the completed surveys and writing additional scientific articles to share findings from VE-HEROeS. Learn more about VE-HEROeS and find updates at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/studies/heroes/index.asp>.

THE AGENT ORANGE REGISTRY AND BLUE WATER NAVY VETERANS

Blue Water Veterans who served on ships offshore of Vietnam and not more than 12-nautical miles from the demarcation line of the waters of Vietnam and Cambodia as established in the Blue

Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 are now eligible for VA's Agent Orange Registry. Please note that eligibility for the Agent Orange Registry does not automatically make a Veteran eligible for benefits. Veterans, check on our Blue Water Veterans web page at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/locations/blue-water-veterans.asp>.



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