



Photo: U.S. Army Sgt. Matthew Moeller



VA research on

AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ VETERANS

VA researchers are seeking new ways to restore ill and injured Veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to their highest level of functioning, and helping create the best life possible for them when they return home.

ABOUT AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ VETERANS

- The newest generation of Veterans is characterized by an increased number of Reservists and National Guard members who served in combat zones; a higher proportion of women; and different patterns of injuries, such as multiple injuries from explosions, than were seen among Veterans of previous wars.
- Many service members may need mental health care after returning from duty. Service members may experience symptoms of psychological distress, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Other issues may include stress, mood, anxiety, sleep, psychotic, and addictive disorders.
- Veterans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan are surviving in greater numbers than in previous conflicts due to advances in body armor, battlefield medicine, and medical evacuation transport. As a result, more Veterans are living with disabling injuries, including the often-lifelong effects of traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Afghanistan and Iraq combat Veterans can receive cost-free medical care for any condition related to their service in the theater of war for five years after the date of their discharge or release.

VA RESEARCH ON AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ VETERANS: OVERVIEW

- VA researchers are seeking new ways to address the mental health issues of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, including PTSD. They are also researching TBI and its treatment, and are developing and testing prostheses that will allow Veterans with amputations or other issues to live as independently as possible.
- VA is working on new programs and services to help Veterans reintegrate after deployment. Researchers are looking at how transitioning out of the military affects Veterans' physical and emotional health, work, finances, and social relationships.
- VA's Polytrauma System of Care is the largest integrated system of care dedicated to the medical rehabilitation of Veterans and service members with multiple injuries. Research includes examining pain, TBI, and PTSD that co-occur, known as the polytrauma clinical triad.
- The National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans is an ongoing study of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans aimed at providing insight on the overall health of recent Veterans, improving VA's

understanding of the health services Veterans need, and maximizing the quality of care VA offers to these Veterans.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

- 2010** - Began a [longitudinal cohort study](#) of the longer-lasting health effects of service during the Iraq war
- 2011** - Funded, along with the Department of Defense (DoD), two [consortia](#) to improve treatment for PTSD and mild TBI
- 2014** - [Found](#) that Veterans who sought and received care soon after the end of their service had lower rates of PTSD upon follow-up than those who waited to get treatment
- 2015** - [Confirmed](#), by summarizing the results of 19 unique studies, that Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans had higher rates of respiratory problems during and after deployment
- 2015** - Began work with the [Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine](#) and other partners to learn which programs and services are most helpful to Veterans as they reintegrate after deployment

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RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• **Regions of the brain function differently among people with PTSD**, causing them to generalize nonthreatening events as if they were the original trauma, found researchers from VA and Duke University. The findings suggest that exposure-based PTSD treatment strategies might be improved by focusing on cues that resemble the initial event, but are still distinct from it. (*Translational Psychiatry*, Dec. 15, 2015)

• **Guerilla tactics such as suicide attacks and roadside bombs may trigger more PTSD** than conventional warfare, suggested a VA study of 738 Iraq Veterans. The trend, however, was seen only among men, not women. The researchers say a different mix of factors may influence PTSD among women service members and Veterans. (*Psychological Trauma*, September 2016)

• **Veterans discharged for misconduct have dramatically higher rates of homelessness** than those who left the military under normal circumstances, according to VA researchers from Salt Lake City and Philadelphia. They suggest that misconduct-

related separation could be used as one possible predictor of future homelessness. (*JAMA*, Aug. 25, 2015)

• **Blast exposure may cause microscopic damage that accelerates brain aging**, according to VA Boston Healthcare System researchers. Concussion from blast exposure is associated with neural changes such as altered white matter structure, which could affect mental function and how the brain ages. (*Brain*, August 2015)

• **Nonsuicidal self-injury may be a particularly useful marker** of active suicidal ideation among Afghanistan/Iraq Veterans, according to a Central Texas VA Health Care System study. The study showed that Veterans who self-injured were more likely to have suicidal ideation, and recommends that these Veterans be closely monitored. (*Psychiatry Research*, June 30, 2015)

• **Published data suggest a high prevalence of respiratory symptoms** and respiratory illness consistent with airway obstruction in Veterans deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, according to researchers with the VA New Jersey Health Care System. Veterans deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq were likely exposed to a variety of

airborne hazards, including burn pits. (*Epidemiologic Reviews*, Jan. 14, 2015)

• **Online expressive-writing sessions helped Veterans reintegrate into society**, according to a study led by researchers from the Minneapolis VA Health Care System. The study showed that expressive writing was better than no writing at reducing PTSD symptoms, anger, distress, reintegration problems, and physical complaints. (*Journal of Traumatic Stress*, October 2015)

• **Veterans with pain, TBI, and PTSD have no greater risk of suicide** than those who have PTSD alone. Researchers from the South Texas Veterans Health Care System found that the riskiest combination of conditions for suicide was PTSD, depression, and substance abuse. PTSD has by far the largest effect, and adding depression or substance abuse to PTSD significantly raises the risk of suicide over PTSD alone. (*American Journal of Public Health*, February 2015)

For more information on VA studies on Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans, and other key topics relating to Veterans' health, please visit www.research.va.gov/topics

Researchers are looking at how transitioning out of the military affects Veterans' physical and emotional health, work life, finances, and social relationships.

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