ABOUT GULF WAR VETERANS

- Nearly 700,000 men and women served in the Persian Gulf during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the early 1990s.
- A 2016 epidemiological study by VA Office of Public Health researchers, based on data that were collected in 2012, indicated that almost 20 years after the Gulf War, Veterans of that war continue to report poorer health than those who served at the same time but did not see service in the Gulf.
- VA offers eligible Veterans a free Gulf War Registry health exam to find possible long-term health problems related to Gulf War service. The comprehensive exam includes an exposure and medical history, laboratory tests, and a physical exam. The registry data helps VA understand and respond to the health problems of Gulf War Veterans more effectively.
- A prominent condition affecting Gulf War Veterans is a cluster of medically unexplained chronic symptoms that can include fatigue, headaches, joint pain, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory disorders, and memory problems. VA refers to these illnesses as “chronic multisymptom illness” (CMI) and “undiagnosed illnesses.”
- Because the symptoms vary widely, VA prefers not to use the term “Gulf War Syndrome” when referring to medically unexplained symptoms reported by Gulf War Veterans. However, the condition is often referred to as “Gulf War illness” by VA clinicians and researchers and in the medical literature. As many as 300,000 Veterans—about 4 in 10 of those who deployed to the Persian Gulf during Desert Shield and Desert Storm—are now estimated to have Gulf War illness, based on the latest data.

VA RESEARCH ON GULF WAR VETERANS: OVERVIEW

- VA researchers are learning about conditions affecting Gulf War Veterans and identifying the best ways to diagnose and treat them. Their efforts are guided by a strategic plan for Gulf War research developed with input from leading scientists and researchers, physicians, and Veterans themselves.
- Along with the specific research areas outlined in the strategic plan, VA investigators are conducting research in many other areas important to Gulf War Veterans. These include studies on pain, autoimmune disease, neurodegenerative disease, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory problems, and other chronic diseases.
- The Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans’ Illnesses makes recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on government research relating to the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War.
- One of the largest studies on the health of Gulf War Veterans is VA’s Longitudinal Health Study of Gulf War Era Veterans. This study compares changes in health status over time between deployed and non-deployed Veterans from the Gulf War era.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1995 – Conducted a baseline survey for a longitudinal health study of Gulf War-era Veterans
2003 – Determined that cognitive behavioral therapy and aerobic exercise can help Gulf War Veterans with symptoms of chronic multisymptom illness
2004 – Found that a year of treatment with doxycycline, an antibiotic used to treat bacterial infections, did not improve the health of Veterans with CMI
2011 – Found that nasal continuous airway pressure can alleviate the sleep problems many Gulf War Veterans face, and may also help with memory and thinking issues
More than two decades after the Gulf War, Veterans of the war continued to report poorer health than Gulf-era Veterans who were not deployed.