

AGENT ORANGE

Information for Veterans Who Served in Vietnam

GENERAL INFORMATION



Environmental Agents Service

Department of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.

Washington, DC 20420

APRIL 2001

Agent Orange was used in Vietnam to help U.S. troops.

Agent Orange was a herbicide used in Vietnam to kill unwanted plants and to remove leaves from trees which otherwise provided cover for the enemy. The name, "Agent Orange," came from the orange stripe on the 55-gallon drums in which it was stored. Other herbicides, including Agent White and Agent Blue, were also used in Vietnam to a much lesser extent.

Some Vietnam veterans are concerned about the long-term effects of exposure to Agent Orange.

In the 1970's some veterans became concerned that exposure to Agent Orange might cause delayed health effects. One of the chemicals in Agent Orange contained minute traces of TCDD or dioxin, which caused a variety of illnesses in laboratory animals. More recent studies have suggested that the chemical may be related to a number of types of cancer and other disorders.

When and where Agent Orange was used in Vietnam.

Fifteen different herbicides were shipped to and used in Vietnam between January 1962 and September 1971. Over 80 percent of the herbicides sprayed in Vietnam was Agent Orange, which was used between January 1965 and April 1970. Herbicides other than Agent Orange were used in Vietnam prior to 1965, but to a very limited extent. The total area sprayed with herbicides between 1962 and 1965 was small. Before the end of the spraying in 1971 more than 20 million gallons of herbicides were sprayed over 6 million acres, some of which were sprayed more than once. Spraying occurred in all 4 military zones of Vietnam.

Heavily sprayed areas included inland forests near the demarcation zone; inland forests at the junction of the borders of Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam; inland forests north and northwest of Saigon; mangrove forests on the southernmost peninsula of Vietnam; and mangrove forests along major shipping channels southeast of Saigon.

What concerned Vietnam veterans can do.

In 1978, the Veterans Administration, now known as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), set up the Agent Orange Registry health examination program for Vietnam veterans who were concerned about the possible long-term medical effects of exposure to Agent Orange. Vietnam veterans who are interested in participating in this program should contact the nearest VA medical center for an examination.

What a veteran can expect from this examination.

Veterans who participate in the examination program are asked a series of questions about their possible exposure to herbicides in Vietnam. A medical history is taken, a physical examination is performed, and a series of basic laboratory tests, such as a

chest x-ray (if appropriate), urinalysis, and blood tests are done. If medically required, consultations with other health specialists are scheduled. However, no special Agent Orange tests are offered since there is no test to show if any individual veteran's medical problem was caused by Agent Orange or other herbicides used in Vietnam. There are tests that show body dioxin levels, but such tests are not done by VA because there is serious question about their value to veterans. VA also makes a presumption of Agent Orange exposure for Vietnam veterans.

In its 1994 report on Agent Orange, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) concluded that individual TCDD levels in Vietnam veterans are usually not meaningful because of background exposures to TCDD, poorly understood variations among individuals in TCDD metabolism, relatively large measurement errors, and exposure to herbicides that did not contain TCDD.

How a veteran benefits from taking VA's Agent Orange Registry examination.

The veteran is informed of the results of the examination during a personal interview and gets a follow-up letter further describing the findings. Each veteran is given the opportunity to ask for an explanation and advice. Where medically necessary, a follow-up examination or additional laboratory tests are scheduled. The examination and tests sometime reveal previously undetected medical problems. These discoveries permit veterans to get prompt treatment for their illnesses. Some veterans feel they are in good health, but are worried that exposure to Agent Orange and other substances may have caused some hidden illness. The knowledge that a complete medical examination does not show any problems can be reassuring or helpful to Registry participants. All examination and test results are kept in the veteran's permanent medical record. These data are entered into the VA Agent Orange Registry.

Vietnam veterans can get medical treatment for Agent Orange-related illnesses.

Under Section 102, Public Law 104-262, the Veterans' Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996, VA shall furnish hospital care and medical services, and may furnish nursing home care to veterans exposed to herbicides in Vietnam. There are some restrictions. VA cannot provide such care for a (1) disability which VA determines did **not** result from exposure to Agent Orange, or (2) disease which the NAS has determined that there is "limited/suggestive" evidence of **no** association between occurrence of the disease and exposure to a herbicide agent.

Some Vietnam veterans get disability compensation for Agent Orange-related illnesses.

VA pays disability compensation to Vietnam veterans with injuries or illnesses incurred in or aggravated by their military service. Veterans do not have to prove that Agent Orange caused their medical problems to be eligible for compensation. Rather, VA must

determine that the disability is “service-connected.” A Veterans Services Representative, at a VA medical center or regional office, can explain the compensation program in greater detail and assist veterans who need help in applying. For more information about the VA’s Agent Orange program, call the toll-free helpline: 1-800-749-8387; for disability compensation program information, call toll-free: 1-800-827-1000.

VA has recognized a number of conditions for “service-connection” based on evidence of an association with Agent Orange (or other herbicides used in Vietnam).

The number of diseases that VA has recognized as associated with (but not necessarily caused by) Agent Orange exposure has expanded considerably during the 1990’s. The following conditions are recognized for service-connection for these veterans: chloracne (a skin disorder), porphyria cutanea tarda, acute or subacute peripheral neuropathy (a nerve disorder), type 2 diabetes, and numerous cancers [non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, soft tissue sarcoma, Hodgkin’s disease, multiple myeloma, prostate cancer, and respiratory cancers (including cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus)]. In addition, Vietnam veterans’ children with the birth defect spina bifida are eligible for certain benefits and services. Furthermore, VA was recently authorized to provide certain benefits, including health care, for children with birth defects who were born to women Vietnam veterans.

Other VA efforts are underway to help Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange.

In addition to the efforts described above (that is, Agent Orange Registry examination program, medical treatment, and disability compensation), VA is doing research to learn more about the possible adverse health effects of military service in Vietnam. The Environmental Epidemiology Service (EES) is the premiere office for Vietnam/Agent Orange-related research within VA. EES investigators have completed numerous studies on this subject; summaries are available at our web-site: www.va.gov/agentorange/default.htm.

What other government departments and agencies are doing.

Many other Federal departments and agencies have pursued and/or are conducting scientific studies on this subject. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Air Force (USAF), National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), National Cancer Institute (NCI), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have all been involved in research.

In 1984, the CDC published an important study, partially funded by VA, regarding Vietnam veterans’ risks of fathering babies with birth defects. VA also funded the death among the men involved in the herbicide spraying missions. Air Force researchers have issued numerous reports regarding their findings in this ongoing project.

Several States have undertaken research efforts to learn more about the possible health effects of Agent Orange and the Vietnam experience upon our Nation's veterans.

The National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine has a major role in this issue.

Under Public Law 102-4, the Agent Orange Act of 1991, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of National Academy of Sciences, a non-governmental organization, has reviewed and continues to evaluate all relevant scientific literature and to provide advice to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on health effects of herbicides exposure. The IOM project is being undertaken in accordance with Public Law 102-4. The IOM reported its initial findings in July 1993. Updates were released in March 1996, February 1999, and April 2001. A special report on diabetes was released in October 2000. Future reports are anticipated approximately every two years. The IOM and its subcontractor are also attempting to develop a historical herbicide exposure reconstruction model that could be used in Agent Orange-related research efforts. For additional information and a complete version of the IOM reports, see www.nap.edu.

If researchers could determine who was exposed to Agent Orange, a large-scale health effects study would be feasible.

VA makes the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange for Vietnam veterans. This means that a Vietnam veteran is not required to prove exposure to herbicides in Vietnam. Some researchers are interested in producing better information to accurately estimate the exposure of any individual veteran.

In July 1997, in response to IOM recommendations, VA announced a research initiative to see if it is possible to accurately model the exposure of individual veterans. This study is ongoing.

Certain Vietnam-era veterans who served in Korea also can get the Agent Orange Registry examination.

In September 2000, recognizing that Agent Orange was used in Korea in the late 1960's, VA approved Agent Orange examinations for U.S. veterans who served in Korea in 1968 or 1969. VA took this action despite reports that Republic of Korea troops, not U.S. military personnel, did the actual spraying. In March 2001, Secretary Principi ordered the Registry to be opened to U.S. veterans exposed elsewhere.

Additional information is available.

There is at each VA medical center a "Registry Physician" responsible for the conduct of Agent Orange Registry exams. These doctors participate in national conference calls conducted by the Environmental Agents Service (EAS), and receive frequent mailings from VA headquarters updating them on the latest developments on Agent

Orange issues. Each facility also has an "Agent Orange Registry Coordinator" to facilitate the Agent Orange program.

The *Agent Orange Review* newsletter, prepared by the EAS, provides updated information about Federal government studies and activities related to Agent Orange and the Vietnam experience. Registry participants are automatically added to the mailing list; others can contact the EAS at the address below.

The Agent Orange Brief fact sheets, prepared and updated by the EAS, are available from EAS and at VA medical centers. The following Agent Orange Briefs are now available: A1. General Information; A2. Class Action Lawsuit; B1. Agent Orange Registry; B2. Health Care Eligibility; B3. Disability Compensation; B4. Information Resources; C1. The Problem Encountered in Research; C2. Agent Orange/Vietnam Related Research-VA Efforts; C3. Agent Orange/Vietnam Related Research-Non-VA Efforts; D1. Birth Defects; D2. Chloracne; D3. Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma; D4. Soft Tissue Sarcomas; D5. Peripheral Neuropathy; D6. Hodgkin's Disease; D7. Porphyria Cutanea Tarda; D8. Multiple Myeloma; D9. Respiratory Cancers; D10. Prostate Cancer; D11. Spina Bifida; and D12. Diabetes.

Copies of the newsletters, fact sheets, and additional information is available online at www.va.gov/agentorange/default.htm. Vietnam veterans and their families are also encouraged to call the Gulf War/Agent Orange Helpline. The toll-free telephone number for the Helpline is 1-800-749-8387.

The EAS (131), Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20420, is a good source of information on Agent Orange. The telephone number is 202-273-8580.

Veterans service organizations and State government entities (including Agent Orange Commissions, Departments or Divisions of Veterans Affairs, Departments of Health) have also been helpful to individuals seeking information on this subject.

Website: www.va.gov/agentorange/default.htm

Toll-Free Telephone Gulf War/ Agent Orange Helpline

***** 1-800-749-8387 *****

Environmental Agents Service

Department of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20420

April 2001

IB 10-49

P95203