

GULF WAR NEWSLETTER

INFORMATION FOR VETERANS WHO SERVED IN OPERATIONS DESERT SHIELD AND DESERT STORM AND THEIR FAMILIES

PROACTIVE PAIN MANAGEMENT: 10 WAYS TO MANAGE YOUR CHRONIC PAIN

What is Chronic Pain?

Chronic pain is pain that lasts over a long period of time, even if it comes and goes. This is something that many adults suffer from, and it is one of the symptoms often reported by Gulf War Veterans. In fact, nearly all Gulf War Veterans referred to the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) report chronic pain as one of their top complaints. These Veterans have struggled with chronic or recurring pain since their return from the Persian Gulf in 1991 with little to no improvement, and without a known cause for their pain.

The long term nature of chronic pain makes it different from acute pain, which is a short term condition. Chronic pain often occurs after the recovery from an initial injury or illness that may have caused acute pain. Chronic pain can affect a particular part of the body, or it might be an all-over pain. The symptoms of chronic pain can be different for everyone, and so can the treatments. No matter how you are experiencing chronic pain, it is important to find ways to manage your pain over the long term, without negative side effects.

What Can I Do About It?

Learning how to control pain, rather than being controlled by pain, will help you live the best life possible. There are a lot of ways that you can manage your pain, both at home and with help from your doctor or other providers. Every treatment may not be right for you, but you should try a variety of ways to control and minimize your chronic pain.

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VOLUNTEER FOR RESEARCH

The WRIISC is currently seeking volunteers to participate in studies on non-medicine based treatments for chronic pain in Gulf War Veterans.

VA researchers at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System are studying whether symptoms of chronic pain can be improved using a technique called *Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS)*.

For more information or to determine if you are eligible to participate, visit www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/warrelatedillness/research/volunteer/ca-wriisc.asp#repetitive_transcranial or contact the WRIISC at (650) 852-3233.



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1. Medication

There are many medications that can be used to reduce acute pain. These medications are useful and effective for short term use, but they are usually not helpful for long-term treatment because they could lose their effectiveness over time and often have serious future side effects. There are some medications that are safer for long-term use and can reduce pain. Medication should be chosen by an expert and reviewed for continued effectiveness on a regular basis. Talk to your doctor about what types of medication might be right for you, and keep in mind that medication alone often is not enough to treat pain. Finding the right combination of treatments will help you feel better and live better.

2. Exercise

Low impact exercise is likely to benefit people suffering with chronic pain in several ways, and it is a key method to managing pain. Exercise can help strengthen the muscles that may be contributing to pain. It can also improve your overall health and help you lose weight, all of which can lead to less discomfort and improved pain tolerance.

Walking, riding a stationary bike, or using a rowing machine are all good aerobic exercises that can help reduce pain. Swimming and other water exercises can also be an excellent choice, and many VA facilities provide pool programs for local Veterans.

3. Yoga

Yoga, referred to by some as British Military Calisthenics, is considered a mind-body practice that combines physical postures, controlled breathing, and meditation. Yoga can help reduce pain levels and increase functions by relieving stress and supporting your body's own healing processes. Whether you are new to yoga or not, there are many different types of yoga that you can try depending on your physical needs. The WRIISC and other VA facilities offer a variety of yoga classes for Veterans.

4. Pilates

If you have joint problems, participating in a Pilates exercise program can be especially beneficial, as most of the exercises are done while lying down. Pilates was first developed by Joseph Pilates during World War I, while he was interned in a British military hospital. He used mattress springs and other available items to develop a system to rehabilitate and maintain muscle strength in injured soldiers while they were confined to bed. The exercises are particularly useful for low back pain as they strengthen your core and other back stabilizing muscle groups.

5. Healthy Living

When treating chronic pain, it is important to look at your overall health and well-being. Diet and pain can be connected. Make sure you are eating a healthy, balanced diet and that you are getting enough sleep each night. Symptoms of pain can sometimes worsen if you are not well rested.

6. Acupuncture

Acupuncture is another treatment that has been found to be helpful for chronic pain. It improves the body's functions and promotes healing through the stimulation of specific points on the body. Acupuncture must be offered by a trained medical professional, or by a licensed Acupuncturist. Many VA facilities offer both individual and group Acupuncture programs to Veterans.

VOLUNTEER FOR RESEARCH

Veterans of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm: you may be eligible for a non-drug study involving group Yoga or a Support Group for chronic pain.

Study Location:

VA Palo Alto Health Care System

Frequency & Duration:

- 1 day / week
- 10 weeks
- Follow-up interviews at 18, 26, and 34 weeks

\$250 compensation for completing entire study

For more information please contact the Study Team at: (650) 665-0159

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**PROACTIVE PAIN MANAGEMENT:
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7. Meditation

Meditation is typically used to reduce stress and anxiety, but it can also be used to manage chronic pain. Meditation will help you learn to focus your attention, which can help you relax and let go of unpleasant thoughts and feelings.

8. Massage Therapy

Massage therapy is often used to relieve pain. There are varying techniques, but in general it involves rubbing or kneading of muscles and joints. Massage therapy is delivered by a licensed massage therapist or health care provider, but you can also learn ways to do some part of the therapy at home on your own.

9. Keep a Pain Journal

Help your doctor help you — you can work closely with your primary care provider in order to determine how to effectively deal with your painful symptoms. It is important to communicate with your doctor as openly and honestly as possible about where you feel pain, how bad it feels, how often you feel it, and what makes it better or worse. This will help you create an individualized plan for managing your pain. Keeping a pain journal will help you track your pain symptoms and make it easier to talk to your doctor about them. A pain journal does not have to be a written diary. It can be in any format as long as you record your symptoms, and remember them for the next time you talk to your doctor. If you are a smart phone user, there are even free apps that

you can download that can help you track your pain symptoms.

10. Get Involved

Sometimes you can manage your pain by simply taking your mind off of the symptoms. You may already have a favorite hobby, or you can try something new. For some people, social interactions can also help to reduce stress and lead to better pain management. Most importantly, try not to let your pain keep you from doing the things you enjoy.

Eliminating your pain may not be possible, but there are many ways that you can gain control and live the happier life you deserve. For more information on the many options for treating chronic pain, visit the WRIISC at www.warrelatedillness.va.gov, or the VHA Pain Management website at www.va.gov/painmanagement. ★

THE FASTEST WAY TO GET A DISABILITY CLAIM DECISION

If you are a Veteran that needs to file a disability compensation claim for the first time or you need to submit a new claim for a previous service-related condition, there is now a faster, easier way to get a claim decision. With the help of your local Veterans Service Officer, you can file an electronic claim, or eClaim, through eBenefits and get a faster VA decision.

What is an eClaim?

VA now offers Veterans the ability to initiate and submit claims online through the VA/DoD eBenefits web portal. All you need is a free Level 2 Premium eBenefits account to start your eClaim today. An eClaim removes all of the paper clutter connected with filing a traditional paper claim. You can now directly submit your information online into VA's claims processing system. This allows VA to more quickly process your information and make a faster claim decision. For an even faster disability compensation claim decision, Veterans can also choose to file an electronic Fully Developed Claim (FDC) through eBenefits.

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GULF WAR REGISTRY: THREE REASONS TO PARTICIPATE

Are you a Gulf War Veteran interested in your health and ensuring the health of fellow Veterans? Consider joining VA's Gulf War Registry. Established in 1990, the Gulf War Registry is an important resource for understanding the health of the military personnel who served in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn. Here's why more than 152,000 Veterans have participated to date:

1. The Gulf War Registry is a helpful tool for Veterans and researchers.

Veteran participants each receive a personalized free health exam. This is one way to learn about possible long-term health effects related to environmental exposures during military service. You'll discuss your symptoms, diagnoses, and self-reported Gulf War hazardous exposures. If you need treatment, you may be encouraged to receive free or low-cost, specialized medical care for those conditions from VA.

The data collected help VA understand and respond to your health problems more effectively. The Registry also helps VA researchers collect information on source-related health concerns that can help VA improve and refine health care policies.

Learn more, visit www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/registry-exam.asp

2. Most Veterans who deployed after 1990 can join the Registry.

Veterans who served in the Gulf during Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, or Operation New Dawn are eligible based on their recollection of service, not military records. You also do not need to be enrolled in VA health care to receive an exam. If further care is needed, you may decide to enroll in VA or consult a private medical provider.

The Gulf War Registry is uniquely focused on the range of hazardous natural and man-made environmental exposures that may have occurred during military service, including depleted uranium, chemical and biological warfare agents, medical prophylaxis, pesticides, fuels, oil well fire smoke, infectious agents, and deployment-related stress, just to name a few.

Some Veterans may also be eligible to participate in VA's new Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. For more information, please visit: <https://veteran.mobilehealth.va.gov/AHBurnPitRegistry/#page/home>.

3. Participation is easy. Just follow these two steps.

STEP 1: Contact your local VA Environmental Health Coordinator about scheduling a free Gulf War Registry health exam. Locate yours by visiting www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp.

STEP 2: Once scheduled, attend your Gulf War Registry health exam, which consists of a quick, non-invasive medical appointment that includes basic questions about your health and exposure history. You may be asked to return if further testing or additional lab work is necessary.

GULF WAR REGISTRY

152,000
PARTICIPANTS TO DATE

JOIN THEM

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GULF WAR REGISTRY: THREE REASONS TO PARTICIPATE, *continued from page 4*



Participation in the Registry does not result in a disability claim.

The Registry and disability claim processes are entirely separate. To file a claim for disability compensation for health problems related to military service, read the article on page 3 of this publication, or visit www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/apply.asp. These claims are reviewed and decided on a case-by-case basis.

For more information about the Gulf War Registry Health Exam, visit www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/registry-exam.asp. ★

★ **GULF WAR REGISTRY AT A GLANCE** ★

- Free, quick, and easy medical exam
- Does not require enrollment in VA health care
- Not a VA disability compensation exam

THE FASTEST WAY TO GET A DISABILITY CLAIM DECISION, *continued from page 3*

What is an electronic Fully Developed Claim (FDC)?

When you provide all required evidence at the same time you submit a claim electronically through eBenefits AND certify that you have no more evidence, you are filing an electronic FDC. Providing all your documentation up front helps VA issue the fastest claim decision possible. Be aware, your claim will be removed from the FDC Program and processed through the traditional claim route if you do not include sufficient evidence, fail to attend your VA medical appointment, or if additional evidence is received after submission. You can learn more about the FDC Program and filing an eClaim at www.benefits.va.gov/fdc or visit the VBA Media and Publications Page to view informative videos on these topics.

Contact a Veterans Service Officer for help filing an eClaim or electronic FDC, or visit www.eBenefits.va.gov and follow the guided step-by-step process. Agents at VA's toll-free number 1-800-827-1000 can also answer any questions you may have. Do not get stuck waiting for a claim decision longer than you have to — take control of your claim and file an eClaim today! ★



GULF WAR PRESUMPTIVES

VA presumes that some health conditions were caused by military service. In practical terms, Gulf War Veterans who meet certain criteria do not have to prove an association between their illness and military service. By assuming a link between symptoms and military service, VA simplifies and speeds up the application process for health care and disability compensation benefits. Presumptive illnesses are listed in the graphic to the right.



Presumptive Illnesses and Military Service

For Gulf War Veterans, VA presumes that unexplained symptoms are related to Gulf War service if a Veteran has experienced them for six months or more. The “presumptive” illness(es) must have first appeared during active duty in the Southwest Asia theater of military operations or by December 31, 2016, and be at least 10 percent disabling.



GULF WAR PRESUMPTIVE ILLNESSES



CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME

A condition of long-term and severe fatigue that is not relieved by rest and is not directly caused by other conditions.



FIBROMYALGIA

A condition characterized by widespread muscle pain. Other symptoms may include insomnia, morning stiffness, headache, and memory problems.



FUNCTIONAL GASTROINTESTINAL DISORDERS

A group of conditions marked by chronic or recurrent symptoms related to any part of the gastrointestinal tract. Functional condition refers to an abnormal function of an organ, without a structural alteration in the tissues. Examples include irritable bowel syndrome, functional dyspepsia, and functional abdominal pain syndrome.



UNDIAGNOSED ILLNESSES

With symptoms that may include but are not limited to: abnormal weight loss, fatigue, cardiovascular disease, muscle and joint pain, headache, menstrual disorders, neurological and psychological problems, skin conditions, respiratory disorders, and sleep disturbances.

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Chronic Multi-Symptom Illness

Chronic multi-symptom illness (CMI) describes the presence of symptoms in two or more body systems that last or recur regularly for more than six months. This term was first used in 1998 in the article describing the symptoms of Gulf War Veterans and its use and meaning has evolved over the years. According to the Institute of Medicine, CMI was a general term that applies to a diverse mix of conditions. Some examples of CMI include:

- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Fibromyalgia
- Gulf War Illness
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome

If you suffer from CMI, consider reaching out to VA to get help. VA is actively strengthening its support of Veterans with CMI through enhanced recognition, education, and monitoring of their needs. Through an improved system of care and a well-prepared workforce, Veterans with CMI will find the clinical care and additional benefits they need to optimize their health and quality of life. ★

VA ANNOUNCES NEW WORK GROUP TO STUDY BRAIN CANCER IN GULF WAR VETERANS

Members of VA's Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses have expressed concerns about the possible association between exposure to chemical nerve agents and the occurrence of brain cancers in Gulf War Veterans.

To address these concerns, VA announced that a new work group of VA subject matter experts will review the incidence of brain cancer in Gulf War Veterans. The work group is expected to present Secretary Robert A. McDonald with its findings in spring 2015.

The work group will study Gulf War Veterans who may have been exposed to chemical weapon agents during the demolition of an ammunitions depot in Khamisiyah, Iraq. This event took place in March 1991 after the Gulf War cease-fire.

"VA recognizes and respects the service, dedication and many challenges faced by Veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and is committed to improving the health and well-being of these Veterans," said VA Secretary McDonald.

"We are forming this work group to conduct a thorough review of all available documentation to help us determine if there could be a correlation between brain cancers and possible exposure to chemical weapon agents."

More information on health effects of Gulf War exposures can be found at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/sources/chem-bio-weapons.asp. ★





MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND PARTICIPATE IN GULF WAR RESEARCH

Do you have an interest in making a difference in the health and well-being of fellow Veterans? Consider becoming a volunteer for a clinical trial. VA and other research organizations are actively evaluating the health effects of Gulf War service. This research will inform medical care for Gulf War Veterans and how to prevent, detect, or treat possible diseases. When you participate in a clinical trial you provide hope for fellow Veterans and help researchers find better treatments for others in the future. Sign up today! For a list of current and upcoming clinical trials, visit www.clinicaltrials.gov.

- Click on **Advanced Search**
- In the **Search Terms** box, type "Gulf War"
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- Click **Search**



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