

# GULF WAR NEWSLETTER

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

## MESSAGE FROM DR. LOREN ERICKSON

Welcome to VA's 2019 Gulf War Newsletter. As Chief Consultant for VA's Post Deployment Health Services and as a Veteran, I thank you for your service to our nation. I am happy to share with you this newsletter, [available online](#).

Post Deployment Health Services is excited to inform you that to better serve Veterans, we will update and combine the Gulf War and Post-9/11 Vet Newsletters beginning with the next edition of the newsletter. Many of the issues faced by Veterans served by these two newsletters are similar. This allows future newsletters to have more articles, including research overviews, benefits updates, and general information. Also, Post Deployment Health Services will be able to publish the newsletters for Veterans online twice a year instead of only once a year.

This issue of the newsletter features VA programs for Gulf War Veterans, information about yoga classes and treatment, research on Gulf War illness and balance, links to helpful benefits resources, and more. Also, this issue highlights how VA is working to be innovative with emerging technology by using telehealth to provide environmental health registry exams from the Orlando, Florida, VAMC to Veterans in other nearby VA locations. We encourage you to participate in an environmental health registry, such as the [Gulf War Registry](#) and the [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#), and to obtain an exam by contacting an environmental health coordinator near you.



Loren Erickson, MD, MPH, DrPH

## NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MEDICINE RELEASES THE LATEST REPORT IN THE GULF WAR AND HEALTH SERIES

VA asked the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) to review the existing research on possible intergenerational health effects resulting from deployment-related exposures among Gulf War Veterans. On November 28, 2018, NAM released the report, Gulf War and Health: Update 2018, Generational Health Effects of Serving in the Gulf War.

In this report, which is volume 11 in the series, NAM reviewed the scientific literature for several toxic substances, including burning oil wells, pesticides, nerve agents, prophylactic agents, depleted uranium, and vaccines, that

may be associated with reproductive, developmental, and epigenetic effects in parents and children. NAM also investigated areas requiring further scientific study and the scope and methodology required to conduct additional research on possible health effects in Veterans' descendants.

VA is reviewing the content of the report in a formal, multi-step process and performing an independent review of the topic, including a review of studies that were published after the NAM's literature review. Any recommendations will be sent forward for consideration by VA Secretary Wilkie.

Find the [full report](#). To read the full report for free, click the "read publication online for free" link on the upper right-hand side of the page.

## WEB RESOURCES

[Benefits Overview](#)

[Health Care Overview](#)

[VA Disability Compensation](#)

[Gulf War Registry Exam](#)

[Burn Pit Registry](#)

[Illnesses Presumed Related to Service](#)

[Infectious Diseases Presumed Related to Service](#)

[Survivor Benefits](#)

[eBenefits](#)

[Veterans Crisis Line](#)



## VA GULF WAR PROGRAM

VA serves Gulf War Veterans through registries, research, education, and more. Read below to see all that VA offers:

- VA runs two legislatively mandated registries, the [Gulf War Registry](#) and the newer [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#). The Gulf War Registry is a no-cost exam that can lead to consults with other specialists and further testing, when indicated. The Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry includes an online questionnaire where you can document your exposures and report health concerns, and you can schedule a no-cost exam if desired.
- VA has conducted a considerable amount of research on Gulf War Veterans, looking at causes of Gulf War illness, treatments, and more. Read about [VA research](#), including research from the [VA Office of Research and Development](#).
- VA has commissioned the National Academy of Medicine (NAM), an independent organization that provides objective advice based on the available science, to review and report on Gulf War exposures and health. Read about the latest volume in this series of reports from NAM on page 1 in this newsletter.

- The [War Related Illness and Injury Study Center](#) provides extensive research, education, and treatments for Gulf War Veterans.
  - VA has a [Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses](#) that advises the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on Gulf War research.
  - VA reaches out to Gulf War Veterans through [newsletters](#), social media including [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), hosting Veteran "listening sessions," and working closely with Veterans Service Organizations.
  - VA collaborates with the Department of Defense on research and has an ongoing, large-scale [project to better define and treat Gulf War illness](#).
  - VA has created several webinars and online learning modules for providers on topics such as Gulf War illness and chronic-multisymptom illness. Learn more on page 4 in this newsletter.
  - VA has presented on Gulf War illness and other topics at professional conferences.
- [Learn more](#) about programs, research, and benefits for Gulf War Veterans.



## TELEPHONE RESOURCES

Health Care

1-877-222-8387

Benefits

1-800-827-1000

TDD (Hearing Impaired)

1-800-829-4833

## VA ORLANDO PIONEERS TELEHEALTH TECHNOLOGY FOR ITS ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH REGISTRY EXAMS

VA offers Environmental Health Registries for Gulf War Veterans, including the [Gulf War Registry](#) and the [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#). 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 Environmental Health Registry exams at the Orlando VA Medical Center (VAMC). 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

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health registry exams for Veterans in different locations in Central Florida. A Veteran can meet a nurse at a VAMC 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 Veterans’ deployments and garrison-related toxic exposures, and can consult with other experts as necessary.

Contact an [Environmental Health Coordinator](#) near you to find out about scheduling a registry exam, either onsite or virtual, and to learn about deployment-related exposures.

## WRIISC RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT: VETERANS WITH GULF WAR ILLNESS/REDUCED BALANCE FUNCTION CAN IMPROVE

One area that has not been thoroughly researched in Gulf War Veterans is the function of the vestibular system (organs located in your inner ears). The vestibular system provides us with information about spatial orientation and balance when moving and about where we are relative to gravity. This is very important because we use this information every day to ensure we are able to stand up without falling as well as move around. Vestibular function is critical for balance and has also been shown to affect memory and blood flow in the brain.

A recent study by Dr. Jorge Serrador and his research team at the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) in East Orange, NJ, found that Veterans with Gulf War illness (GWI) have reduced vestibular function in comparison to civilians. Similarly, compared to civilians, Veterans with GWI swayed (lost balance) more when standing, indicating poor balance.

To examine if vestibular function and balance could be improved in Veterans with GWI, the team developed a novel electrical stimulator that, unlike traditional neurostimulators, provides very low levels of a type of random electrical signal that cannot be felt by the patient. The electric stimulator is clipped to the earlobe and attached to a standard index card-sized box. Using this specialized stimulation, the WRIISC research team was able to reduce swaying, improving the balance of 100 percent of the Veterans with GWI in the study.

Though further research is necessary, the results highlight two findings:

- 1) Reduced vestibular function and poor balance may be widespread in Veterans with GWI;
- 2) Low level electrical stimulation that cannot be felt by the patient appears to improve balance in 100 percent of the Veterans studied.

This study suggests that vestibular function should be assessed in GWI. Since vestibular function has been implicated in memory and the regulation of blood flow in the brain, treatment that targets this system may provide a novel therapeutic intervention for GWI. With these findings, Dr. Serrador and his research team plan to examine if using a portable version of the stimulator improves balance and helps alleviate or lessen the severity of other symptoms found in GWI.



*Katia Gugucheva, MD*



## WRIISC: EDUCATING PROVIDERS LEADS TO OPTIMAL HEALTH FOR GULF WAR VETERANS

VA's War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) educates health care providers nationwide on how to best care for Veterans with post-deployment health concerns. To achieve this, the WRIISC collaborates with VA's Employee Education System to develop online training modules available to VA and non-VA community providers.

There are currently four modules available. The topics include:

- How health care providers can identify, assess, and manage deployment-related environmental exposure concerns
- Airborne hazards and open burn pit exposure concerns and VA's [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#)
- How providers can identify, diagnose, manage, and appropriately treat Gulf War illness
- Chronic multisymptom illness identification, management, and treatment

As of November 2018, more than 1,100 health care providers have completed one or more modules. The WRIISC plans to develop additional on-demand, web-based trainings for providers. Learn more about these [trainings](#).



## YOGA SHOWS PROMISE IN REDUCING PAIN FOR VETERANS WITH GULF WAR ILLNESS

By P. J. Bayley, Rachael Cho, and Louise Mahoney

Despite decades of research, no one has been able to find a clear cause for the fatigue, pain, and cognitive disturbances that are a part of what is commonly referred to as "Gulf War illness" (GWI). Previous research supports the view that Gulf War Veterans with GWI are medically ill, but their symptoms are not currently well-treated by conventional medical interventions.

Clinical trials show that yoga can be effective in treating some of the most common symptoms of GWI, especially chronic musculoskeletal pain. The War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) in Palo Alto, CA, conducted the study "Comparative Efficacy of Yoga vs. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for Treating Chronic Pain in Gulf War Illness" to see if yoga could treat chronic pain in Veterans with GWI.

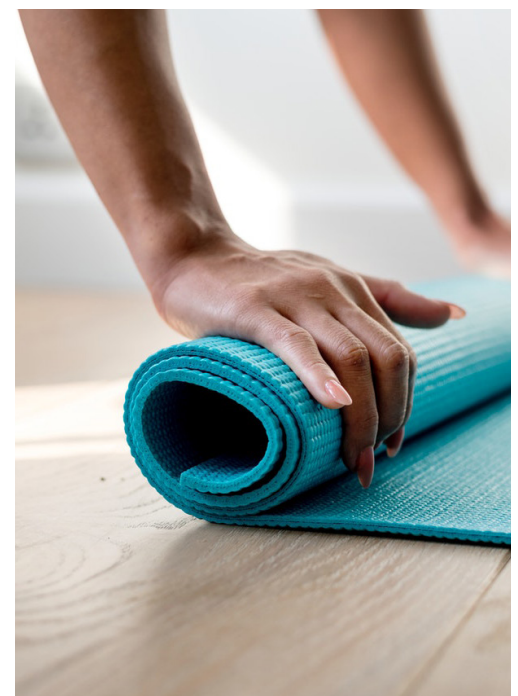
WRIISC researchers developed a 10-week yoga program using a broad range of yoga techniques, including controlled breathing, yoga postures, and meditation. They also developed a step-by-step homework guide, and study participants were asked to practice yoga at home. A comparison group followed a 10-week cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) protocol focused on the treatment of pain. The CBT group was also provided with and asked to complete homework. Seventy-five Veterans with GWI were randomly divided into one of the two treatment groups – yoga or CBT for pain.

At the end of treatment, the yoga group showed a significant reduction in pain

relative to baseline ratings. In contrast, researchers found no significant reduction in pain in the CBT group. At the six-month follow-up, Veterans in the yoga group still had reduced pain. The study results are preliminary, and data analysis is ongoing into the treatment effects on pain, mood, quality of life, and autonomic nervous system function. However, these initial findings on yoga indicate that it is a safe and effective treatment for pain in GWI.

The development of complementary and integrative health for the treatment of chronic conditions, including pain, is a growing trend in healthcare. The 10-week protocol from this study and the homework guide will be published along with the final study results. This approach could be rapidly adopted by healthcare providers who may like the relatively low-cost and minimal resources needed to provide such yoga programs in a group class setting.

This project was supported by a CDMRP/DoD Gulf War Illness Research Program Innovative Treatment Evaluation Award (#11488016)





## IMPROVED ACCESS TO SPECIAL PROGRAMS: YOGA “SLEEP” GUIDED MEDITATION CLASS AVAILABLE FROM HOME

The War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) in Palo Alto, California, has offered therapeutic yoga to local Veterans since 2010, to Veterans via telehealth since 2012, and by phone since 2016. These programs have been popular (25,956 individual visits between 2010 - 2018) and provide Veterans with drug-free relief from a wide variety of symptoms<sup>1</sup>. Yoga “sleep” guided meditation classes are available from the WRIISC by phone for Veterans across the country.

This phone-based program began when one of the yoga teachers became suddenly ill. Louise Mahoney, Director of Education and Risk Communication at the Palo Alto, California WRIISC, filled in with an iRest™ yoga nidra meditation class by phone so she would not disappoint the Veterans at the six CBOCs participating in yoga in-person 400 miles away. At the end of the class, she asked the Veterans for feedback and was thrilled to discover that they enjoyed the class and found it beneficial. This unfortunate illness provided the opportunity to discover that yoga meditation led by phone is a beneficial alternative to in-person yoga. From there, the WRIISC began offering iRest™ by phone and developed the IFC WRIISC Yoga Wellness referral consult so health providers could refer Veterans to the program.

iRest™ is an expanded yoga nidra (“sleep”) protocol focusing on meditation that was developed with active duty military, so it is appropriate for the military and Veteran population. The meditation follows a 10-step protocol, emphasizing a different step

each week. During the meditation, Veterans start by establishing their own mission and purpose for their life and what might serve them well for the current meditation session. They also begin to develop their own internal “safe haven,” which they can use throughout the meditation when needed. The meditation then leads Veterans to explore their current experience starting with the senses, moving into a body scan and a breathing exercise.

During the meditation, the physical body may enter a sleep-like state, where the mind is still active and aware, but the body is at rest. It is in this state that most of the work takes place. The next stages of the meditation work through felt sensations in the body, that come with emotions and thoughts or beliefs. Veterans develop an awareness of how emotions and thoughts affect the body. Sensations, thoughts, and emotions that arise during the meditation are “messages” about their current state. iRest™ provides a method to process these messages while “sleeping.”

The meditation is easy – Veterans can just sit back and follow the guidance of the instructor. Many can learn to experience a sense of inner joy, and develop an awareness of and connect with an inner strength and resilience that allows them to more appropriately “respond” rather than “react” to situations in life. Veterans may also benefit from the restful sleep-like state achieved during the meditation, and many report reduced pain, improvement in sleep quantity and quality, and relief from other chronic symptoms.

All Veterans are welcome to attend the class by phone. It is held on **Thursdays** at 5pm Pacific Time (see additional time zones). Please call **1-800-767-1750**, Access code: **24953#** to join. Recorded sessions are available on the [WRIISC website](#).

1. Schultz-Heik RJ, Meyer H, Mahoney L, Stanton MV, Cho RH, Moore-Downing DP...Bayley PJ. Results from a clinical yoga program for veterans: yoga via telehealth provides comparable satisfaction and health improvements to in-person yoga. *BMC Complement Altern Med* 2017; 17: 198.

### CLASS TIMES (standard time)

3:00pm — Hawaii

4:00pm — Alaska

5:00pm — Pacific

6:00pm — Mountain

7:00pm — Central

8:00pm — Eastern



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs