

# AGENT ORANGE NEWSLETTER

INFORMATION FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

## MESSAGE FROM DR. LOREN ERICKSON



Loren Erickson, MD, MPH, DrPH

As both a Veteran and the son of a Vietnam Veteran, and as the Director and Chief Consultant for VA's Post Deployment Health Services (PDHS), I welcome you to the 2018 issue of the Agent Orange Newsletter. This newsletter includes information for Veterans and their families who

may be concerned about herbicide exposure. I appreciate the contributions of Veterans, and I hope this issue of the newsletter provides you with helpful information.

This issue provides information on the conditions that VA presumes are caused by Agent Orange exposure and how to obtain benefits for health conditions. You can also read about the health care and benefits available to those who have lived or worked at Camp Lejeune and about liver fluke infection from eating undercooked or raw fish during military service in Southeast Asia. In addition, this issue profiles Veterans who have served in Vietnam and their reflections on VA services, including the Agent Orange Registry.

PDHS is a VA-delivered Foundational Service, meaning its work is fundamental to VA's mission and is rarely found outside of VA. Along with the information provided in this newsletter, you can learn more from PDHS about diseases, benefits, and other resources related to Agent Orange at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/index.asp> and about other military exposures at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/index.asp>.

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## VE-HEROES STUDY – DATA COLLECTION COMPLETE

VA researchers have completed data collection for the Vietnam Era Health Retrospective Observational Study (VE-HEROeS), a large nationwide study comparing the health and well-being of U.S. Vietnam War Veterans to other U.S. Veterans who served elsewhere during the same time period and to similarly aged members of the U.S. public without military experience. In 2017, researchers asked a scientifically-designed, random sample of approximately 43,000 Veterans and 11,000 members of the U.S. public to complete a survey about their health.

Out of those invited to complete the survey, 45 percent of Veterans and 67 percent of those without military experience returned the survey, surpassing the goal for the response rate. VE-HEROeS researchers are currently working on presentations and scientific articles to share the findings from this study.

For more information about the VE-HEROeS study, visit <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/studies/heroes/index.asp>.



## CAMP LEJEUNE - HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS



VA provides health and disability benefits for Veterans, Reservists, National Guard members, and family members who lived or worked at Camp Lejeune, a U.S. Marine Corps Base in North Carolina, between August 1, 1953, and December 31, 1987, for at least 30 days. VA is offering these benefits because the drinking water at Camp Lejeune was contaminated with industrial solvents, benzene, and other chemicals, possibly leading to various health conditions.

VA provides qualifying Veterans with cost-free health care for the following 15 conditions:

- Certain cancers (esophageal, breast, kidney, lung, and bladder cancer)
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma
- Leukemia
- Renal toxicity
- Female infertility
- Scleroderma
- Myelodysplastic syndromes
- Hepatic steatosis
- Miscarriage
- Neurobehavioral effects

For the above conditions, family members of military personnel who lived at Camp Lejeune are eligible for reimbursement of out-of-pocket medical expenses not already covered by their other health plans.

For Veterans and Reserve and National Guard members, VA has established presumptive service connection for eight health conditions associated with exposure to contaminants in

the water supply. This means VA presumes that service at Camp Lejeune caused the conditions and provides disability compensation without additional proof.

These conditions are:

- Adult leukemia
- Aplastic anemia and other myelodysplastic syndromes
- Bladder cancer
- Kidney cancer
- Liver cancer
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma
- Parkinson’s disease

Read more about Camp Lejeune benefits at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/camp-lejeune/index.asp> and disability benefits at [www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/camp-lejeune.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/camp-lejeune.asp). For information about the Camp Lejeune Family Member Program, go to <https://www.clfamilymembers.fsc.va.gov/>.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COORDINATORS—HELPING VETERANS LIKE YOU



Douglas Turner, Environmental Health Coordinator

Do you know about VA’s health registries and the Environmental Health Coordinators across the

country who can help you join? Registries include a free, voluntary medical assessment for Veterans who may have been exposed to certain environmental hazards during military service. VA offers several health registries, found at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/benefits/registry-evaluation.asp>. An Environmental Health Coordinator can connect you to the registries for which you qualify.

Vietnam Veteran Gary Thistlethwaite served in the Navy from August 1964 through October 1967, and

was in Vietnamese waters on board the USS Tucker and the USS Dixie from 1965 through 1967. As a Veteran, he was interested in finding out what services were available to him. Mr. Thistlethwaite contacted his local Veterans Service Organization in Pittsburgh, Pa., and received a variety of names and phone numbers, including contact information at VA.

He learned about the Agent Orange Registry Health Exam, (<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/registry-exam.asp>)

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a free medical assessment for Veterans with concerns about Agent Orange exposure during military service. “I was informed that Douglas Turner was involved with the Agent Orange Registry. I was curious and gave him a call,” said Thistlethwaite. Turner is an Environmental Health Coordinator at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System. “We talked a little bit. He asked me if I wanted to participate in the registry. At first said no and then I changed my mind,” Thistlethwaite said.

When he was younger, Thistlethwaite was told not to worry about any health consequences resulting from his service; however he now wonders about the health effects for Veterans who were on Navy ships ([https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/claims-postservice-agent\\_orange.asp](https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/claims-postservice-agent_orange.asp)) and potential intergenerational effects from service.

Thistlethwaite completed an Agent Orange registry exam. “I thought it was a good initial first step as someone new to the VA system,” he said.

An Agent Orange registry exam includes an exposure history, medical history, physical exam, and laboratory tests, as needed. A VA health professional discusses the results with the Veteran face-to-face and in a follow-up letter. The registry helps Veterans understand health problems that may be related to Agent Orange exposure during military service.

There are Environmental Health Coordinators affiliated with VA medical centers across the

country. An Environmental Health Coordinator can help you schedule an appointment for a registry exam and provide answers to questions about military exposures or connect you to a clinician who can answer your questions.

Environmental Health Coordinator Douglas Turner is also a Veteran, having served in the Army between 1977 and 1980 and as a member of the Reserves for four years afterwards. Many members of his family have also served in the military. Turner received health care at VA and was impressed with his care. He started working at VA in 2017. “I thought this would be a way to serve my fellow Veterans,” he said.

“VA is a really large organization, and navigating through all of the information can be a challenging task. One thing I like to do is provide information,” said Turner. He provides resources depending on the way a conversation goes with a Veteran and the questions they ask. “A lot of information out there is medically focused. There are other products out there like the Million Veteran Program (<https://www.research.va.gov/mvp/>) that might be of interest to Veterans.”

Of all the registries VA offers, Turner says the Agent Orange Registry is the registry that most Veterans are interested in. “Vietnam-era Veterans are concerned about immediate health issues since it has been so many years.” He has found the Gulf War Registry to be the second most popular registry.

Environmental Health Coordinators can help you with the Agent

Orange Registry exam, other VA registry exams, (<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/benefits/registry-evaluation.asp>) and the answers to questions you may have about exposures during military service. Find an Environmental Health Coordinator near you. (<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>)



**Douglas Turner, Army  
82nd Airborne Division**





# DISABILITY COMPENSATION FOR VIETNAM VETERANS EXPOSED TO AGENT ORANGE



Vietnam Veterans may be eligible for disability compensation benefits because of exposure to Agent Orange. This article highlights the eligibility criteria and important information for filing a claim for benefits.

## Criteria for Eligibility

In order for a Veteran who served in Vietnam to qualify for disability compensation benefits for a presumption based on exposure to Agent Orange, he or she should have:

- A qualifying medical diagnosis, and
- Proof of service in Vietnam.

Veterans without a qualifying medical diagnosis must show a connection between the disease and herbicide exposure during military service to receive disability compensation.

## Qualifying Medical Conditions

Certain conditions qualify as presumptive, service-connected diseases. This means VA presumes they are related to a Veteran's service in Vietnam. This includes the following conditions:

- Chloracne or other acneform disease consistent with chloracne
- Soft-tissue sarcoma
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Hodgkin's disease
- Respiratory cancers (lung, bronchus, larynx, or trachea)
- Multiple myeloma
- Prostate cancer
- Acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy, now classified as early-onset peripheral neuropathy
- Type 2 diabetes mellitus
- Chronic lymphocytic leukemia
- AL amyloidosis
- Ischemic heart disease
- Chronic B-cell leukemia
- Parkinson's disease

In order to qualify for benefits, the following conditions must become noticeable to a degree of 10 percent or more within one year of the last date of exposure to Agent Orange:

- Chloracne
- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Early-onset peripheral neuropathy

There is no time limit for all other listed diseases.

## Proof of Service in Vietnam

The Agent Orange Act of 1991 implemented under VA regulations requires "duty or visitation" within the Republic of Vietnam, including its inland waterways, between January 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975, to establish a presumption of Agent Orange exposure.

VA may also pay benefits based on exposure to herbicides for the following categories:

- Veterans who served in a unit that operated in the Korean

Demilitarized Zone between April 1, 1968 and August 31, 1971;

- Vietnam-era Veterans whose service involved duty on or near the perimeters of certain military bases in Thailand between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975. For more information, see: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/locations/thailand.asp>;
- Veterans who operated, maintained, or served onboard C-123 aircraft from 1969 through 1986. See: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/agentorange-c123.asp>; and
- Other Veterans whose duty outside of Vietnam involved the direct handling of Agent Orange.

## Filing Claims based on Agent Orange Exposure

- To file a claim online for disability compensation, use eBenefits at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov>.
- You may also use VA's Decision Ready Claim (DRC) program. This allows you to submit claims that are decision-ready so you can get your claim processed as fast as possible.

To submit a DRC, you must:

- Appoint and work with an accredited Veterans Service Organization (VSO),
- Gather all relevant and required evidence to support your claim, and
- Submit a Disability Benefits Questionnaire completed by your physician, or attend a VA claim exam, if needed, before submitting your claim.

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When you work with an accredited VSO and provide all the necessary evidence with your application, you can get a decision on your claim in 30 days or less.

### How do I find an accredited VSO?

To find an accredited VSO near you, go to the VSO Search page on eBenefits at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/vso-search>. Accredited VSOs are fully trained on the DRC Program and can help you determine if a DRC is right for you.

For questions regarding VA benefits, call the VA toll-free number at **1-800-827-1000**.

## CALLING ALL VIETNAM VETERANS: IT'S TO YOUR BENEFIT TO JOIN THE AGENT ORANGE REGISTRY



By Bill Outlaw, Vietnam Veteran and Communications Manager at VA's Patient Care Services.

Like many who were serving in Vietnam, I watched with approval as the C-123 aircraft flew around parts of Vietnam to spray and help destroy the foliage that the Viet Cong used for cover in their operations. I had not heard of

Agent Orange at that time, but I did understand they were spraying the areas with chemicals. It was to my benefit for the military to go after the enemy in any way possible.

Many years later, I began hearing stories in the news about the effects that the chemical called Agent Orange was having on Vietnam Veterans and began to realize that it was what I had seen those planes spraying; however, I still did not really think that I had been affected. After all, I was in reasonably good health and had not shown any noticeable signs of the cancers, skin diseases, and other medical issues that some Veterans were having. So, I did not take the time to sign up for the Agent Orange Registry. Sign up for a registry? I thought it would be too much hassle.

Then, after working at VA, I began reading about all of the medical issues and how badly some Veterans had been affected. I began to understand that while some of the health conditions related to Agent Orange may have not shown up yet, they still could as we in the Baby Boomer generation grow older.

After joining the Office of Patient Care Services at the Veterans Health Administration, I found myself working with co-workers who were directly involved with the operation of the Agent Orange Registry, and I was asked whether I was registered. Last year, I decided to sign up.

I signed up, and soon after, had an appointment with a doctor at the VA Medical Center in Washington, D.C. It was easy. No shots. No blood drawn. Just a series of questions to answer about my medical history.

While I still have no major medical problems now that I know of, I am in the registry and, more importantly, am set up in the system should I develop one of the presumed medical conditions in the future. The evaluations help alert Veterans to possible long-term health problems that may be related to exposure to specific environmental hazards during their military service.

While registering, I was asked by a medical center employee whether I was receiving VA medical care. Well, no, I wasn't. I had been on a private sector insurance plan since I was first employed at VA and did not qualify; however, I learned that at some time between when I came to work and now, the Priority Level changed for Vietnam Veterans. Now, all Vietnam Veterans are eligible to receive health care in the VA system.

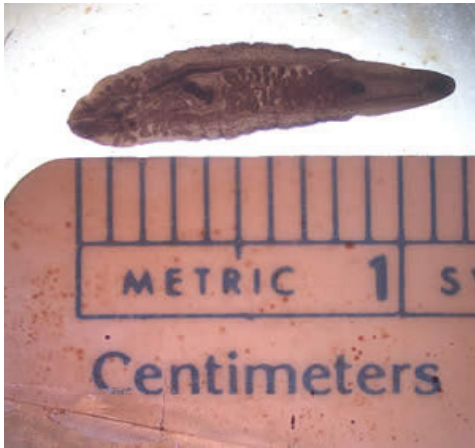
As a result of getting on the Agent Orange Registry, I am now enrolled in VA health care and receiving care at the VA hospital in Washington, D.C., and I am glad I am. So, if you are a Vietnam Veteran, take note – it is to your benefit to register now. It doesn't hurt, it doesn't cost anything, and it is the smart thing to do. Signing up now will likely benefit you later. Learn more about the registry at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/registry-exam.asp>.

### How Many Agent Orange Registry Exams Were Conducted?

Initial Exam	690,302
Follow-up Exams	81,926
<b>Total (initial + follow-up)</b>	<b>772,228</b>
<b>(as of April 20, 2018)</b>	



## BILE DUCT CANCER AND LIVER FLUKE INFECTION—WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Bile duct cancer (also called cholangiocarcinoma) is a rare cancer of the biliary duct system. While it is rare, bile duct cancer becomes more common as people grow older.

While most military personnel in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, ate canned meals or other meals provided by the military, some Veterans may have eaten raw or undercooked freshwater fish during their service. These Veterans might have been infected with tiny parasitic worms called liver flukes, which are found in

the fresh waters of Southeast Asia. If eaten, liver flukes can grow to adulthood inside the human biliary duct system. The irritation and scarring caused by liver fluke infection can lead to bile duct cancer. Liver flukes are able to live for up to 25 years, so those ingested during the Vietnam War would no longer be alive in the bile ducts of Veterans.

Currently, there is no validated test of liver fluke infection available for clinical use in the United States. Tests used in a recent research project are not specific for the fluke in Vietnam.

Liver fluke infection is just one cause of bile duct cancer. Two of the major risk factors are infection with the Hepatitis B or C viruses. Other risk factors are primary sclerosing cholangitis, chronic ulcerative colitis, cysts in the bile ducts, cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, obesity, alcohol use, smoking, and genetic factors. According to current research, the

occurrence of bile duct cancer is not increased in U.S. Vietnam War Veterans when compared to other groups of people in the U.S.

The symptoms of bile duct cancer include jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes), pain in the abdomen, dark urine, light or 'clay' colored stool, fever, itchy skin, nausea and vomiting, and unexplained weight loss. If you are concerned about bile duct cancer, please talk to your health care provider.

Learn more about bile duct cancer and liver fluke infection at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/infectious-diseases/cholangiocarcinoma.asp>. Learn more about liver flukes at [https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/liver\\_flukes/](https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/liver_flukes/).





## VA BENEFITS RESOURCES

### Web resources

Benefits overview:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/index.asp>

Health care:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/health-care.asp>

Agent Orange registry exam:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/registry-exam.asp>

eBenefits (24/7 access to VA and Department of Defense benefits):

<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/homepage>

Compensation for Agent Orange exposure:

[https://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/claims-postservice-agent\\_orange.asp](https://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/claims-postservice-agent_orange.asp)

Survivor benefits:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/survivors.asp>

Benefits for Veterans' children with birth defects:

[https://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/claims-postservice-agent\\_orange.asp](https://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/claims-postservice-agent_orange.asp)

### Telephone resources

Health care: 1-877-222-8387

Benefits: 1-800-827-1000

TDD (hearing impaired): 1-800-829-4833

**VA**



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