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Veterans  
Administration

# Agent Orange Information for Veterans Who Served in Vietnam

Questions  
and  
Answers

Office of Public  
and Consumer Affairs

*Fellow Vietnam Veteran:*

*While the passage of time may have eroded much of the bitterness of the long and divisive conflict in Vietnam, it has also made us aware of the remaining problems of that conflict.*

*Agent Orange is one of those lingering problems—controversial, emotional and extremely complex. Those of us who were exposed to Agent Orange would like to know now what adverse health effects, if any, are associated with that exposure.*

*At present there is no sound scientific evidence to indicate there are any long-term health problems related to Agent Orange exposure. However, there is too little research in this area to rule out the possibility of long-term health effects. In addition, some Vietnam veterans have claimed that exposure to Agent Orange is the cause of their own health problems. Because there is a great deal of concern about this issue, and not enough objective information, the Veterans Administration and other agencies are now engaged in important Agent Orange research.*

*Dozens of scientific research efforts are under way to answer the many questions which have been raised about possible effects of exposure to Agent Orange. It may take a few years. But some results will be available beginning late this year. In the meantime medical care is provided to veterans for problems potentially related to Agent Orange. With the passage of Public Law 97-72 last year, Congress assured certain health care services for eligible veterans who feel their health impairments could be the result of Agent Orange exposure.*

*In this pamphlet you will find questions typical of those asked of the VA for which we do have answers. I hope this publication will provide a clearer picture of the efforts to address the Agent Orange problem as we seek the long-term answers that everyone wants.*



CHARLES T. HAGEL  
Deputy Administrator  
Veterans Administration  
June 1982

**Q. What is Agent Orange?**

A. Agent Orange was a herbicide, or defoliant, used in Vietnam to kill unwanted vegetation and to defoliate trees which otherwise would have provided cover from which the enemy could attack American personnel. Agent Orange was a reddish-brown liquid made of two chemicals, 2, 4-D and 2, 4, 5-T. Both chemicals have been used widely throughout the world since the 1940s by farmers, foresters and homeowners. The herbicide was called "Agent Orange" because it was shipped to Vietnam in orange-striped barrels.

**Q. Why are people worried about Agent Orange?**

A. Beginning in 1978 a concern was expressed that the veterans exposed to Agent Orange when it was used in Vietnam between 1965 and 1971 might be subject to delayed health effects from the exposure. These concerns were based on the fact that one of the chemicals, 2, 4, 5-T, contained minute traces of a toxic chemical, dioxin (TCDD), which contaminated the herbicide during the manufacturing process. The contaminant dioxin is of concern because animal studies have shown it to be toxic to certain species. Like other toxic substances, dioxin has produced a number of serious conditions among laboratory animals.

**Q. What is being done to determine whether Vietnam veterans really were affected by Agent Orange?**

A. The VA took a number of steps which included consulting with sources of information on herbicides, providing instructions to VA hospitals and offices to examine veterans and process claims, setting up a system to capture and correlate information obtained during examination of veterans who reported health concerns and encouraging research proposals among VA's 5,000 medical researchers. A search of worldwide scientific literature on Agent Orange was completed with VA funding, and the Agency has contracted for the development of an epidemiological study to determine what effects veterans might have suffered from exposure to Agent Orange. VA also has asked other government agencies to use their resources and expertise to help find answers to the remaining scientific questions.

**Q. What are the other federal agencies doing?**

A. Major efforts are under way by the Department of Air Force and the Centers for Disease Control. The Air Force is conducting an epidemiological study of "Ranch Hand" personnel, the aircrews who handled and sprayed Agent Orange in Vietnam. The current health of this group is considered especially significant because its members were heavily exposed to the chemicals and they are among the few service members whose exposure to the chemicals is fully documented. The Centers for Disease Control are pursuing a study to determine the relationship between military service in Vietnam and the incidence of birth defects. Other studies include short- and long-term follow-up on populations exposed to dioxin during industrial accidents.

**Q. What should a veteran do if he is concerned about Agent Orange?**

A. The veteran should contact the nearest VA medical center for an examination. An appointment can be arranged, generally, within two to three weeks. The veteran is asked a series of questions relating to possible exposure to herbicides in Vietnam. A medical history is then taken, a physical examination is performed, and a series of base-line laboratory tests, such as a chest x-ray, urinalysis, and blood tests, are conducted. Consultations with other physicians are requested if the examining physician thinks it is medically indicated. The veteran is informed of the results of the examination verbally and in writing, and is given the opportunity to ask for explanation and advice. Where medically indicated, arrangements are made for scheduling a follow-up examination or additional laboratory tests. Information gathered in the examination is documented in the veteran's permanent medical record. This information is also entered into the computerized VA Agent Orange Registry.

**Q. Will the VA treat Vietnam veterans who have health problems that they believe may have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange?**

A. Under Public Law 97-72, approved on November 3, 1981, the VA can treat eligible veterans for certain disabilities which may have been caused by exposure to

Agent Orange. Guidelines have been issued to all VA medical centers in order to implement this legislation. Individual veterans should contact the nearest VA medical center to determine their eligibility.

**Q. What kinds of health problems are being reported by veterans?**

A. Veterans have reported a wide range of symptoms, many of which relate to skin problems. Most of the other problems are of a nonspecific nature such as headache, loss of drive, irritability and change of personality. These general symptoms do not focus on any specific diseases or organ systems. The numerous research efforts being conducted both inside and outside the federal government should provide some definite answers as to whether or not health problems among veterans are the result of service in Vietnam.

**Q. Has any evidence been found that medical problems were actually caused by exposure to Agent Orange?**

A. At present, the best available scientific evidence fails to indicate that exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides used in Vietnam has caused any long-term health problems for veterans or their children. One effect sometimes observed after dioxin exposure is a skin disorder, called chloracne, which in appearance resembles some common forms of acne. While some of the people exposed to dioxin in industrial accidents developed chloracne almost immediately, this reaction has not been firmly established among Vietnam veterans.

**Q. What is the purpose of the VA Agent Orange Registry?**

A. The registry represents VA efforts to identify all Vietnam veterans who are worried about the possible health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and to find out what types of medical problems they are experiencing. Veterans are provided a free physical examination and medical advice based on their current state of health. The registry serves as a mechanism to provide follow-up with these veterans should significant information develop.

**Q. Will the Agent Orange Registry examination show whether a veteran has been or will be adversely affected by Agent Orange?**

A. Since relatively little is known at present about the possible delayed effects of Agent Orange exposure on humans, the examination cannot establish a definite connection in an individual. Answers must await the results of on-going research. The examination will help to detect any illness or injury the veteran may have, regardless of origin, and may provide a basis for treatment. No characteristic symptoms or diseases have been noted among a significant number of the veterans undergoing registry examinations.

**Q. Does Agent Orange exposure cause human birth defects?**

A. There is no medical evidence to establish that exposure to Agent Orange has caused birth defects in the children of Vietnam veterans. Industrial workers exposed to the ingredients of Agent Orange have not fathered an increased proportion of children with birth defects. A study of male mice treated with Agent Orange revealed no effect on fertility nor on the rate of birth defects. However, some veterans have expressed concern about this possibility, and therefore the VA is providing funding for a major research effort in this area at the Centers for Disease Control.

**Q. Why is the VA opposed to doing fat biopsies to check for the presence of TCDD human tissue?**

A. The test to determine if TCDD is present in body tissue is a highly complex and technically difficult process. First of all it requires a surgical procedure to obtain enough fat for this chemical analysis. Secondly there are only a few laboratories in the world which have the equipment and the technical expertise to conduct the analysis. Third, and probably most important, the VA has determined, based on a pilot study, that there is no good correlation between the presence of TCDD in body fat and known exposure to Agent Orange. There is no correlation between TCDD in body tissue and reported health problems. For these reasons, the VA at the present time does not believe that this procedure would be of any help to Vietnam veterans.

**Q. Since VA has no proof that Agent Orange does not cause problems, isn't it being overly bureaucratic by putting the burden of proof on veterans who have problems?**

A. As a basis for compensating a veteran for permanent disabilities caused by military service, there must, in fact, be a disability or symptom, not just a fear of one. There must also be a logical basis for a determination that a given disability had its inception during, or was aggravated by, the individual's military service.

**Q. Is there a comprehensive source of scientific information about the herbicides used in Vietnam?**

A. A review and analysis of world literature on herbicides was completed in October 1981. Copies of this two-volume scientific document can be purchased as follows:

Volume 1 - Analysis of Literature  
Stock No. 051-000-00154-1  
\$9.00 ea.

Volume 2 - Annotated Bibliography  
Stock No. 051-000-00155-9  
\$9.50 ea.

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Information for  
Veterans Who Served  
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Questions and Answers  
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Veterans  
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# Agent Orange

Information for Veterans  
Who Served in Vietnam

Office of Public  
and Consumer Affairs

## MEDICAL CARE AUTHORIZED

Although a concerted research effort has been under way for some time to resolve questions relating to the health-care issues raised by Agent Orange, many of these questions remain unanswered. Good research of this type cannot be accomplished quickly and, therefore, results may not be available for a few years to come. In the meantime, in recognition of the need to provide concerned eligible Vietnam veterans with appropriate medical care and treatment for illnesses or disabilities possibly related to exposure to this defoliant, Public Law 97-72, the "Veterans' Health Care, Training and Small Business Loan Act of 1981," was signed on November 3, 1981.

Essentially, Public Law 97-72 authorizes the Veterans Administration to "provide certain health care services to any veteran of the Vietnam Era (August 5, 1964 - May 7, 1975) who, while serving in Vietnam, may have been exposed to dioxin or to a toxic substance in a herbicide or defoliant used for military purposes. Health care services may not be provided, under this law, for the care of conditions which are found to have resulted from a cause other than exposure to these substances."

Interim guidelines for carrying out the provisions of this law have been furnished to all VA health care facilities. Final guidelines, based on consumer comments on the interim guidelines published in the Federal Register, will be provided to these same facilities in the near future.

## HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

Health-care services authorized under this provision of the law are limited to hospital and nursing home care in VA facilities. Outpatient care may be provided at a VA facility: (1) in order to prepare a veteran for hospitalization, (2) in order to complete inpatient care which was initiated in a VA hospital, or (3) in order to provide care which would make unnecessary the need for hospitalization. These services will be provided without regard to the veteran's age, service-connected status or the ability of the veteran to defray the expenses of such care.

Veterans are furnished outpatient care under this authority within the limits of VA facilities' capacity to provide such care. Outpatient services may be provided on a fee-basis only in connection with post-hospital care and then only where VA or other government facilities lack the capability to provide the needed care or cannot do so economically because of geographical inaccessibility.

In providing outpatient care under this authority VA is charged with assuring that veterans will be accorded priority ahead of other nonservice-connected veterans and equal to former POWs.

## **MEDICAL EXAMINATION**

VA guidelines provide that a complete medical history, physical examination and appropriate diagnostic studies will be developed for each veteran who served in the Republic of Vietnam and who requests VA medical care. For those who have been examined within the prior six months, only those procedures which are medically indicated by the current circumstances will be repeated. Where the findings reveal a condition requiring treatment, the responsible staff physician must determine whether the condition resulted from a cause other than the exposure to Agent Orange.

## **HEALTH CARE EXCEPTIONS**

Health care services may not be provided under this law for the care of conditions which are found to have resulted from a cause other than the specified exposure. The physician will consider that the following types of conditions are not ordinarily considered to be due to such exposure:

- a. congenital or developmental conditions, e.g., spina bifida, scoliosis;
- b. conditions which are known to have pre-existed military service;
- c. conditions resulting from trauma, e.g., deformity or limitation of motion of an extremity;
- d. conditions having a specific and well-established etiology, e.g., tuberculosis, gout;
- e. common conditions having a well-recognized clinical course, e.g., inguinal hernia, acute appendicitis.

A physician may believe that a veteran requires care for any of these conditions and presents a complicating circumstance that makes the provision of care under this authority appropriate. He may decide to provide it following consultation with the facility chief of staff and the environmental physician.

## **OTHER**

This law provides for health care only. A determination that a veteran is eligible for care under this law does not constitute a basis for service-connected disability or in any way affect determinations regarding service-connected disability.

Individual veterans should contact the nearest VA medical center to determine their eligibility. Any military records which the veteran has should be brought to the medical center in order to speed the process of eligibility and care and ensure a more complete medical history. Veterans who are not provided needed medical care under Public Law 97-72 may be furnished care if they are eligible under any other statutory authority.

## **AGENT ORANGE REGISTRY**

The VA has a continuing program for examining Vietnam veterans who are concerned about the possible health effects of Agent Orange. The findings of these examinations are entered into the Agent Orange Registry. Vietnam veterans are encouraged to request an examination at their nearest VA health care facility. A veteran who participates will receive a comprehensive physical examination and be asked to complete a questionnaire about his service in Vietnam. Following the examination, the veteran will be advised of its results. The examination could help to detect any illness or injury the veteran may have, regardless of origin, and may provide a basis for treatment. The examination may also serve as a basis for a possible future claim for VA benefits.