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April, 2022



U.S. AIR FORCE



Welcome Home

Nine respiratory cancers added to list of illnesses presumed caused by burn pit smoke

By Leo Shane III

Veterans Affairs officials this week will add nine respiratory cancers to the list of illnesses presumed caused by burn pit exposure, easing the path veterans suffering from those conditions have to take to get disability benefits. The move follows promises by administration officials last fall to speed up care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pit smoke in Iraq, Afghanistan and other overseas locations over the last 32 years. In a statement, VA Secretary Denis McDonough called the move overdue. "Veterans who suffer from rare respiratory cancers associated with their service deserve the very best America has to offer, but they've had to wait for the care and benefits they deserve for far too long," he said. "That ends now. With these new presumptives, veterans who suffer from these rare respiratory cancers will finally get the world-class care and benefits they deserve, without having to prove causality between their service and their condition."

The nine new conditions are:

- Squamous cell carcinoma of the larynx;
- Squamous cell carcinoma of the trachea;
- Adenocarcinoma of the trachea;
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the trachea;
- Adenosquamous carcinoma of the lung;
- Large cell carcinoma of the lung;
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the lung;
- Sarcomatoid carcinoma of the lung;
- Typical and atypical carcinoid of the lung;

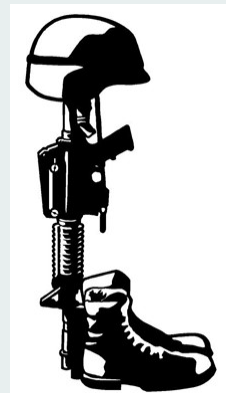
The policy applies to veterans who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations beginning Aug. 2, 1990, to the present, or in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syria or Djibouti beginning Sept. 19, 2001, to the present. That includes all veterans who served in the Gulf War, the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan. VA officials did not say how many individuals would be affected by the new policy, although they did classify the cancers as "rare" in their announcement. The issue of presumptive benefits for burn pit victims has been a priority for advocates in recent years because of the difficulty in linking many health problems to the toxic smoke present at many overseas bases. Under most cases, veterans must show a direct link between their medical condition and military service in order to receive disability benefits, which can amount to several thousand dollars a month.

But when VA grants presumptive status for an illness, that skips the need for proof of connection, making the path to getting disability payouts easier. In the past, VA has approved presumptive status for things such as exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam, a known carcinogen. Last August, for the first time, the department approved presumptive status for veterans suffering from three illnesses — asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis — related to burn pit smoke overseas. As of last month, VA officials had processed about 16,500 new claims related to those burn pit injuries, totaling \$36 million in retroactive benefits.

The White House also promised additional research into other medical problems believed linked (but never conclusively proven) to the toxic smoke produced when military members disposed of a variety of waste in open-air trash fires. VA officials said the decision to add the nine new conditions came after researchers found "biological plausibility between airborne hazards and carcinogenesis of the respiratory tract" and that "the unique circumstances of these rare cancers warrant a presumption of service connection." Both McDonough and President Joe Biden have said they will look to go even further with the burn pit presumptives, but are limited somewhat by VA benefits regulations. "Supporting our veterans is a critical part of the Unity Agenda I proposed for our nation," Biden said in a statement. "No matter where we live or who we voted for in the last election, we all agree that we should serve our veterans as well as they have served us. My administration will continue to do everything in its power to support our nation's veterans, and I urge Congress to pass bipartisan legislation to comprehensively address toxic exposures and further deliver the vital benefits our veterans have earned. I will sign it immediately." Congressional leaders are considering sweeping legislation that would grant presumptive disability status for an even broader list of medical conditions believed linked to burn pits. Department officials are expected to reach out to veterans who have filed burn pit claims in the past to inform them of the changes. Individuals can also get more information on the benefits through the VA web site.

[Nine respiratory cancers added to list of illnesses presumed caused by burn pit smoke \(armytimes.com\)](https://www.armytimes.com)

- Are you newly discharged from the military? Were you injured or do you have health issues that may be related to your service? Make an appointment to see if you qualify for disability compensation.
- Are you a service member, veteran, or the surviving spouse of a service member? Make an appointment to see what types of benefits may be available to you.



SCOTT COUNTY VETERAN AFFAIRS

The Veteran Services program provides assistance to all veterans and their dependents in applying for federal and/or state benefits and other related matters. Federal benefits include:

Applying for:

- Compensation (Service connected disability)
- Pension (Non-service connected disability)
- Widow's Benefits
- Survivors Benefits Plan
- Certificates of Eligibility for Home Loans
- Aid and Attendance for Nursing Home and Housebound Veterans
- Iowa's Veteran's Home Admittance
- Apportionments
- Overpayments
- Appeals
- Obtaining military records and medals
- Upgrading discharge
- Distributing grave markers and flag holders

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Deal on toxic exposure bill includes more VA staff, dozens of new VA medical clinics

By **Leo Shane III**

Veterans Affairs officials would set up 31 major medical clinics across America and hire thousands more claims processors and health care staff under compromise toxic exposure legislation unveiled in the Senate Tuesday. The provisions would be attached to the already massive Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act (or PACT Act) which passed out of the House in March. That measure carried a price tag of more than \$200 billion over the next decade and would potentially affect as many as one in five veterans living in America today. Concerns about the scope of the bill and the potential of the new veterans benefits to overwhelm existing VA systems led to resistance from Republican lawmakers. But last week, the Democratic and Republican leaders of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee announced a breakthrough to advance the legislation, somewhat surprisingly by broadening the bill's scope even further. In a statement released Tuesday afternoon, committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., and Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, said they believe the new plan can pass through Congress and provide veterans suffering from toxic exposure injuries with the services they deserve.

"This legislation expands VA health care eligibility for post-9/11 combat veterans, improves VA's claims processing, and delivers VA the necessary resources to take care of our veterans from every generation," they said. "While our work is far from over, together we're committed to keeping up our end of the bargain to those who sacrificed on behalf of our freedoms by getting this bill across the finish line as soon as possible." In a separate statement, House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-Calif., offered support for the compromise bill, which will have to be again approved by his chamber before becoming law. "I have long said that we cannot let cost or implementation hurdles get in the way of making good on our promise," he said. "Toxic-exposed veterans do not have time to wait." Senate officials did not release any estimates for what the revised PACT Act may cost.

BENEFITS FOR BURN PIT VICTIMS AND MORE

As in the House plan, the Senate compromise would establish a presumption of service connection for 23 respiratory illnesses and cancers related to the smoke from burn pits, used extensively in those war zones to dispose of various types of waste, many of them toxic. The bill also provides for new benefits for veterans who faced radiation exposure during deployments throughout the Cold War, adds hypertension and monoclonal gammopathy to the list of illnesses linked to Agent Orange exposure in the Vietnam War, expands the timeline for Gulf War medical claims and requires new medical exams for all veterans with toxic exposure claims. Veterans who served in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Guam during the Vietnam War era would be covered for the first time under the same Agent Orange presumptive policies as those who served in Vietnam itself. The bill would also require a significant reconsideration of how VA handles toxic exposure claims, with a formal working group on toxic exposure injuries and research advising top officials on future improvements. VA officials would be granted "the authority to determine that a veteran participated in a toxic exposure risk activity when an exposure tracking record system does not contain the appropriate data," a sharp contrast from the science-only system in use at VA today. Advocates have lamented that in many cases, veterans with serious illnesses obviously connected to their service have been turned away by the department because ironclad data showing chemical exposure during their service does not exist. Phasing each of those provisions into law won't happen immediately, however. For example, hypertension will be added to the list of presumptive conditions caused by Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War right away for individuals "who are terminally ill, homeless, under extreme financial hardship, or are over 85 years old." For other Vietnam War veterans, that won't go into effect until October 2026. Chronic bronchitis would be added to the list of presumptive illnesses caused by burn pits in October 2023. Kidney cancer would not be included in the same category until two years later.

MORE HOSPITALS, MORE STAFF

The most expensive addition to the Senate draft of the legislation is potentially the 31 new medical sites, spread out across 19 states. They include four each in Florida, Texas and Missouri; three in Tennessee; two in Maryland; and one each in Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia and Washington. Under the plan, those sites would be major medical facility leases, arranged thanks to new financial authorities being granted to VA officials. Separately, the department would also be able to establish new academic affiliations with medical institutions for research and treatment purposes. The idea is to significantly expand VA's health care footprint across the country, to ensure that millions of veterans seeking new medical care for toxic exposure injuries don't face longer wait times. Congress has provided support for those new sites in the past, but funding for the locations has so far sidelined the expansion plans. Senate lawmakers also included in the bill a host of new hiring and pay authorities designed to improve hiring and retention at the department. VA Secretary Denis McDonough has pushed for those changes in recent months, saying they are needed to keep the department competitive with private-sector companies. Officials did not say how many new staffers could be added in the medical and benefits offices in coming years.

MORE VETERANS ELIGIBLE FOR HEALTH CARE

Those staffers will be needed because of the expected influx of disability benefits claims and the pressure on VA medical centers. The Senate bill would expand health care access for both veterans with known toxic exposure illnesses and post-9/11 combat veterans, who may not yet have manifested signs of serious diseases from exposure to burn pit smoke and other airborne contaminants. Individuals who "participated in a toxic exposure risk activity" or served in areas where such exposure has already been established would be granted Priority Group 6 status for VA medical care, expanding their access to medical services and nursing home care. Younger veterans would see their VA medical care covered for 10 years after they leave the ranks, up from the current five years. Senate lawmakers passed a similar bill codifying that earlier this year, but the House has not taken up the measure. A full breakdown of the costs and impact of the measure is expected from the Congressional Budget Office in coming weeks. Last week, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said that the package will be brought to the Senate floor for a full chamber vote in early June. If so, the House could vote on it within a few days, possibly sending the measure to President Joe Biden's desk in early July. Biden has already voiced support for the outlines of the measure and said in his State of the Union address earlier this year that Congress needs to act quickly on the issue of veterans health care. A rally on the issue is scheduled for this weekend as part of the Rolling to Remember event in Washington, D.C. Comedian Jon Stewart and a host of veterans organizations are expected to attend and push for swift passage of the PACT Act compromise.

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