

Gulf War Illness: Information for Veterans

A RESOURCE FOR VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES



WHAT IS GULF WAR ILLNESS?

Gulf War Illness (GWI) is a term that refers to a group of real but varied and medically unexplained chronic symptoms found in Veterans deployed to the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm/ Operation Desert Shield (1990- 1991).



WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF GULF WAR ILLNESS?

Symptoms of GWI vary and cannot be grouped into one consistent group of symptoms. This may make it challenging for healthcare providers to recognize and treat it. Here are the most common symptoms of GWI:

- Fatigue
- Muscle and joint pain
- Cognitive difficulty
- Skin rashes
- Abdominal (belly) discomfort/bowel changes
- Headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Sleep disturbances

It is important that prior to making a diagnosis of GWI, a Veteran have a thorough workup for their symptoms as some medically explainable conditions unrelated to GWI may also cause the above symptoms.



HOW MANY VETERANS ARE IMPACTED BY GULF WAR ILLNESS?

Several studies showed that about one-third of Gulf War Veterans have GWI. It's important to note that deployed Gulf War Era Veterans do not have higher rates of death compared to Gulf War Era Veterans who did not deploy.



WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE CAUSES OF GULF WAR ILLNESS?

Despite much research, the potential cause of GWI is unclear. A number of possible causes include:

- Immune dysfunction
- Nerve dysfunction
- Mitochondrial (part of your cells involved in energy) dysfunction
- A genetic and environmental exposure interaction
- Deployment related exposures
- A combination of these factors

Many Gulf War Veterans have concerns that exposure to chemicals such as pyridostigmine bromide (taken in pill form to prevent effects from exposure to nerve agents) and smoke from oil well fires caused GWI. There have been no clear or consistent links found. However, research is ongoing. Reports by the Health and Medicine Division (formerly the Institute of Medicine) on the health effects associated with deployment to the Gulf War, including a review of various environmental hazards, can be found here:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/reports/health-and-medicine-division.asp>

Veterans can work with a healthcare provider or see an environmental health clinician or expert in occupational and environmental exposures if they have specific exposure concerns.



WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR GULF WAR ILLNESS?

GWI falls under a broad term for a group of chronic, unexplained symptoms called Chronic Multi-Symptom Illness (CMI). In 2014, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) released guidelines for healthcare providers caring for Veterans with CMI. These guidelines were updated in 2021. The guidelines can also help healthcare providers identify, manage, and treat GWI. Veterans with concerns about GWI can learn more about the guidelines for treatment of CMI by visiting:

- Patient Summary: <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MR/cmi/VADoDCMIPatientSummary508.pdf>
- FAQ: <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MR/cmi/CMIFAQSheetFinal.pdf>

There are no specific treatments for GWI. The focus of treatment is improving your quality of life and functioning. Treatment without medicine is usually tried first. It can include:

- Graded exercise programs
- Yoga
- Acupuncture
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy

There are some medications which may help reduce your symptoms. Your care should be tailored to you. What works well for you may not work well for someone else. Care coordination is a central part of managing chronic conditions such as GWI. It is important for Veterans to work with their healthcare team to check their response to any treatment.

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