

Three new illnesses connected to Agent Orange allowing quicker health care

Veterans Affairs officials added three new illnesses Tuesday to the list of diagnoses connected to Agent Orange, allowing quicker health care claims for Vietnam veterans suffering from Parkinson's disease, hairy cell leukemia, and ischemic heart disease.

The move follows a study by the nongovernmental Institute of Medicine. The group has been studying the effects of Agent Orange since the early 1990s and this summer suggested a link between those diseases and the toxic Agent Orange chemicals.

In a statement, VA secretary Eric Shinseki said the additions bring to 15 the number of "presumed" sicknesses linked to Agent Orange. Others include prostate cancer and Hodgkin's disease.

Veterans with those conditions will not have to prove any connection between their sickness and their military service when filing a health benefits claim.

"We must do better reviews of illnesses that may be connected to service, and we will," Shinseki said. "Veterans who endure health problems deserve timely decisions based on solid evidence."

At the height of the Vietnam War, U.S. military commanders used Agent Orange — a nickname for a host of herbicides — to destroy the thick jungle canopy concealing guerrilla fighters.

The chemicals were later linked to serious health problems in both civilians and troops, and later in their children, as well. Military records estimate that more than 2.6 million U.S. servicemembers may have been exposed to Agent Orange between 1965 and 1970.

VA officials said that up to 250,000 veterans may benefit from the latest change. In a statement, Veterans of Foreign Wars national commander Thomas Tradewell Sr., a Vietnam veteran, called the additions a significant change and praised Shinseki for the move.

"The VA is saying 'we believe you,' which will enable more veterans to receive the healthcare and benefits they earned and deserve," he said.

Alan Oates, a Vietnam veteran and founder of U.S. Military Veterans with Parkinson's, said Tuesday's announcement was a cause for celebration among his members.

"Before this year, any claims connecting Parkinson's to Agent Orange

were almost always unsuccessful," he said. "We have people whose homes are going into foreclosure because they couldn't get treatment for their disease. So this is great news."

USMVP was one of the groups that brought new research linking the chemicals and the degenerative disorder to the Institute of Medicine, and has been lobbying Congress and the VA for two years to recognize the relationship.

"This is going to help a lot of vets who have suffered for a long time," he said.

The list of illnesses previously recognized under VA's "presumption" rule as being caused by exposure to herbicides during the Vietnam War are:

- Acute and subacute transient peripheral neuropathy
- AL amyloidosis
- Chloracne
- Chronic lymphocytic leukemia
- Diabetes mellitus (Type 2)
- Hairy cell leukemia
- Hodgkin's disease
- Ischemic heart disease
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- Parkinson's disease
- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Prostate cancer
- Respiratory cancers, and
- Soft-tissue sarcoma (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma, or mesothelioma)

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