

VA has screened 5 million Veterans for toxic exposures, paving the way for early detection and treatment of health conditions.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 12, 2023
10:30 am

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it has screened 5 million Veterans for toxic exposures — a critical step to detecting, understanding, and treating potentially life-threatening health conditions. Of the 5 million Veterans who have received the screening, 2.1 million (43%) reported at least one potential exposure.

The screening takes five to 10 minutes and begins with VA health providers asking Veterans if they believe they experienced any toxic exposures while serving in the armed forces. Veterans who answer yes are then asked follow-up questions and offered connections to information on benefits, registry-related medical exams, and other clinical resources, as indicated. Their responses to the screenings are then added to their VA medical record to be included as part of their future care.

This milestone comes just 13 months after the screening [launched](#) at VA medical centers and clinics nationwide as a part of the PACT Act. The PACT Act expanded VA health care and benefits to millions of Veterans, paving the way for VA to deliver [more care and more benefits to more Veterans than ever before](#) in 2023.

“By screening Veterans for toxic exposures, we can improve their health care and detect potential health challenges as early as possible,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “This leads to better health outcomes — and better quality of life — for these heroes who were exposed to toxins while serving our country.”

“We have made significant progress toward our goal to screen all Veterans enrolled in VA health care for toxic exposures at least once every five years,” said **VA Under Secretary for Health Shereef Elnahal, M.D.** “But most importantly, this milestone means we’ve had 5 million opportunities to provide Veterans with the exposure-informed care they deserve.”

The screening covers a variety of different types of toxic exposures, but the two most reported exposures are burn pits and Agent Orange, which together make up more than 60% of Veteran responses. More than half of the Veterans screened (2.6 million) are 65 years old or older, with Veterans under 45 making up just over 900,000 of those screened. Of the nearly 650,000 Women Veterans who regularly use VA care, more than 535,000 have been screened for toxic exposures.

While the toxic exposure screening does not play a role in determining disability compensation, it does provide an opportunity to connect Veterans with the resources they need to file a claim. Each Veteran who reports a potential exposure receives a letter with information about how to apply for benefits.

To fulfill the goal of screening every Veteran enrolled in VA health care at least once every five years, VA is exploring new and innovative ways to reach out to Veterans, including those who are vulnerable or don't routinely access VA care. The Department is also in the pilot stages of developing a self-screening tool that will make the initial question of the screening even more easily accessible to Veterans with access to web-based electronic communications.

The PACT Act has expanded and extended access to VA health care for Veterans. Thanks to the PACT Act and other new laws, many groups of Veterans are now able to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits – including World War II Veterans, Vietnam Veterans, Gulf War Veterans, Veterans who deployed to a combat zone and transitioned out of the service less than 10 years ago, and [more](#). As President Biden directed, all remaining toxic-exposed Veterans will be eligible to enroll directly in VA health care next year under the PACT Act – including any Veteran who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other combat zones during the Persian Gulf War or after 9/11. Veterans who aren't currently enrolled can [submit an application](#) and receive their toxic exposure screening after enrollment.

The PACT Act also expanded VA benefits for millions of Veterans, making more than 300 health conditions “presumptive” for service connection. This means that if an [eligible](#) Veteran has one of these health conditions, VA automatically assumes that the condition was caused by the Veteran's service and provides compensation and care accordingly. VA encourages Veterans and their survivors to apply for these benefits now at [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT).

For more information about how the PACT Act is helping Veterans and their survivors, visit VA's [PACT Act Dashboard](#). To apply for care or benefits today, visit [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT) or call 1-800-MYVA411.

###