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Agent Orange

Information for Veterans Who Served in Vietnam

WHAT IT IS

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 is 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" in Vietnam because it was shipped in orange-striped barrels.

WHY PEOPLE ARE CONCERNED

During 1978, a theory was publicized 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.

The theory was 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.

WHAT THE VA IS DOING

Immediate VA steps included consultation with every known source of information on herbicides, instructions to VA hospitals and offices on how to examine veterans and process claims, setting up a system to capture and correlate all information obtained during examinations 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, if any, 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.

WHAT OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES ARE DOING

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 "Ranchhand" 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.

WHAT A CONCERNED VETERAN SHOULD DO

The veteran can contact the nearest VA medical center for an examination. An appointment can be arranged, generally, within 2-3 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 base-line laboratory tests, such as a chest x-ray, urinalysis, and blood tests, are obtained. 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, both 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 veterans permanent medical record. This information is also entered into the computerized VA Agent Orange Registry data bank.

AUTHORIZED MEDICAL TREATMENT

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.

Operation RANCH HAND - The Air Force and Herbicides
in Southeast Asia 1961-1971

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