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AN INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE CENTER FOR ALL VETERANS
DIAL ALL VETS 255 - 8387 MON. - FRI. 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

AGENT ORANGE UPDATE

One of the major problems facing veterans is a lack of knowledge in the medical community about Agent Orange. Dr. Edward Horvath recently addressed this issue in the March edition of the State Medical Journal. Dr. Horvath, who serves on the Environmental and Occupational Health Committee of the State Medical Society, reviews what is known and not known about Agent Orange and makes suggestions to physicians who are examining concerned veterans. This article is important because it enables any physician to do an 'Agent Orange' screening. Virtually every physician in the state receives the Journal but if your physician has not s/he can obtain a copy of the article from Vets House.

A major obstacle facing veterans trying to obtain a disability from the V.A. is that many of the symptoms show up several years after their discharge. Usually the VA presumes that only conditions which show up within a year after discharge are service related. Several representatives, including Robert Kastenmeier of Wisconsin, have introduced Bill 2297 which would waive the one year limitation for "disabilities and diseases resulting from exposure to the phenoxy herbicide agent orange or other phenoxy herbicides." While passage of the bill would open the door for Agent Orange disabilities the V.A. must still decide which conditions are resultant from exposure to phenoxy herbicides. According to a spokesperson from the office of Rep. Thomas Daschle this session of Congress is likely to legislation establishing some sort of compensation for Agent Orange victims. (Rep. Daschle is a Vietnam veteran who is on the House Veterans Affairs Committee) We urge you to write your representatives in Congress urging them to support HR 2297 and other Agent Orange legislation.

In June of 1980 the Joint Finance Committee authorized expenditure of \$124,000 by the Department of Health and Social Services to identify all Wisconsin Vietnam veterans and provide them with information on potential health hazards associated with Agent Orange. They have sent out questionnaires to 58,000 vets and have received answers from nearly 40% of them, a very high response rate. The department wishes to extend the program in order to send out a more detailed questionnaire to those who requested it, as well as expand their educational program. We urge you to support this valuable program by writing to your state senators and assemblypersons.

AGENT ORANGE

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is Agent Orange?

From 1962 to 1971 the U.S. sprayed over 5 million acres of South Vietnam with 19 million gallons of herbicides. The most widely used defoliant, Agent Orange, was a 50/50 mixture of two common herbicides 2,4,5 - T and 2,4, D. When 2,4,5-T is manufactured it contains a contaminant TCDD, which is commonly, although inaccurately, called dioxin. TCDD is one of the most toxic substances known.

I was in Vietnam but I'm not sure if I came in contact with Agent Orange. How can I be sure?

Since 80% of the spraying was done by C 123's and helicopters it is possible to pinpoint the exact time and place of the spraying missions. To obtain a map of the spraying missions write to the Office of Environmental & Life Sciences Department of the Air Force Washington D.C. 20330. Tell them when and where you were stationed. It is difficult to account for the remaining exposures. If planes encountered hostile fire they would dump their load of defoliant but not document where they would drop it. The remaining defoliant was sprayed by hand or truck along roadsides or perimeters of camps. No records were kept of these sprayings.

I remember going through defoliated areas - could the chemicals still be around then?

They could have been. Under ideal conditions the chemicals breakdown in a few days but TCDD has been found in animals and soil over a year after the area was sprayed.

What exactly does Agent Orange do to me - what are the symptoms?

Our knowledge of the medical effects of the chemicals is based on our laboratory tests on animals and human exposure in industrial accidents. The most common symptoms include:

Chloracne a skin rash that looks like an explosion of blackheads

Liver damage sometimes indicated by brown urine

Tingling or loss of sensation in fingers and toes

Stiffness in joints

Increased susceptibility to infectious diseases due to lymphatic system damage

Severe fatigue

It seems that everytime you pick up the newspaper you find out that something causes cancer- does Agent Orange cause cancer?

Recently released studies from Sweden and West Germany suggest that 2,4,5 - T leads to an increased risk of certain types of cancers including cancer of the stomach, liver, testicles, and lymph glands. On the other hand a study of an industrial accident in Nitro West Virginia indicated no significant increase in cancers 30 years after the accident.

My wife and I would like to start a family but we are concerned about the effects of Agent Orange- what should we do?

Laboratory tests on animals indicate that the chemicals in Agent Orange lead to an increase in certain types of birth defects including spina bifida (open spine), cleft palate, and hydrocephaly (water head) It is very important to point out that these studies were done on females who were exposed. The limited number of studies on males give inconclusive results. Dow Chemical company has done a study of its workers which showed no increase in the number of birth defects among their children. Dr. Tung, minister of health of Vietnam is doing a study of soldiers who fought in the South but who live in the North. Preliminary results indicate an increased rate of birth defects of the type mentioned above. Dr. Moore of the National Toxicological Program recently did a study of male mice who were exposed to Agent Orange and found no increase above the expected rate of defects. All of these studies were done with Agent Orange - it is possible that some combination of chemicals not studied is responsible for an increased rate of birth defects. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta is currently doing a study of Vietnam veterans to see if there is an increased rate of birth defects in families of Vietnam veterans. Even if there is a link between male exposure to those chemicals and birth defects the odds are still strongly in your favor for having a healthy child.

Is there any way that we can be sure?

Genetic counseling, which involves taking a family and medical history as well as certain other tests, is available from certain medical centers in the state. Although they can not establish if you will have a higher risk of having a child with birth defects due to Agent Orange they may be able to predict a higher risk due to other factors. If there is a higher risk you may decide to take a test, amniocentesis, in the first 3 months of pregnancy, which can detect certain types of defects.

I haven't been the same emotionally since I got back from Vietnam- could Agent Orange be causing my emotional problems?

It could be but nobody really knows for sure- researchers just haven't looked at the possible linkage between Agent Orange and psychological problems. Some organizations across the state are starting rap groups of Vietnam veterans who are experiencing difficulties such as flashbacks of their combat experiences, depression, anger and difficulty getting close to people

If you are interested in one of these groups contact Vets House.

A friend of mine went to the V.A. hospital for their Agent Orange program and they didn't do anything for him. Why should I go if they aren't going to do anything for me?

The V.A. has been criticized by many veterans for their response to the Agent Orange issue but it is still important that you go. First of all the V.A. is collecting data from vets so that they can get a better picture of the health problems veterans are having. It is important that you help contribute to this effort. When you go to the V.A. you should also apply for a service connected disability; you probably will be turned down but it is important to get your claim on file in case that they do grant disabilities at a later date. Even if V.A. physicians can't meet your concerns about Agent Orange they find other health problems that you may not be aware of. Veterans who went through the V.A.'s screening program in Minnesota found that many of them had health problems that they weren't aware of and got treatment for those problems.

O.K. I'll go to the V.A. but I would like to get an opinion from another doctor- what should I do?

Unfortunately medical students are taught very little about environmental causes of health problems so few physicians have an understanding of the chemical and its effects. The March 1981 issue of the state Medical Journal has published an article which summarizes the research on Agent Orange and offers suggestions to physicians for appropriate tests and procedures for patients who ask about Agent Orange. Virtually every doctor in the state receives this journal but if they did not they can obtain a copy of it from Vets House.

What will the physician do if I ask for an Agent Orange test?

Agent Orange is a diagnosis of exclusion, that is a physician will try to diagnose it by excluding other possibilities. To do this the physician will take an extensive medical and occupational history and do certain routine lab tests. Because any doctor can do this examination you should have your regular doctor do it and keep going to him or her so that they can better monitor changes in your health.

I have heard people talk about some type of test that detects Agent Orange in your body- why don't they do that test?

There are many problems with the fatty tissue biopsy that people are referring to. TCDD is harmful in such small amounts that it has to be measured in parts per trillion (ppt) and there are only a few laboratories in the country that have such equipment.

I know that I was exposed to Agent Orange - is there anything that I can do about it- is there any cure?

Unfortunately scientists know very little about the various chemicals and how they work in your body. The only recommendation that doctors can make about your health is to follow the general rules of maintaining good health including getting enough rest, eating well balanced meals and stop smoking. It is especially important to see a physician on a regular basis so that s/he can monitor any changes in your health. Because TCDD is harmful to your liver you should limit your consumption of alcohol and barbituates. TCDD is stored in fatty tissue and some people suggest that if you lose weight you will release the TCDD into your system. There is no evidence to prove this so you and your physician will have to evaluate the possible ill effects of releasing TCDD into your system compared with the known effects of being overweight.

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