



VETERANS VOICE

Winnebago County Department of Veterans Services Newsletter

February 2021

Airborne Hazards and Burn Pit Exposures

“Airborne hazard” refers to any sort of contaminant or potentially toxic substance that we are exposed to through the air we breathe. While on active duty, military service members may have been exposed to a variety of airborne hazards including:

- The smoke and fumes from open burn pits
- Sand, dust, and particulate matter
- General air pollution common in certain countries
- Fuel, aircraft exhaust, and other mechanical fumes
- Smoke from oil well fires

The VA understands that many Veterans are especially concerned about exposure to the smoke and fumes generated by open burn pits.

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas of the Southwest Asia theater of military operations, open-air combustion of trash and other waste in burn pits was a common practice. Depending on a variety of factors, you may experience health effects related to this exposure. Factors that may indicate you have a greater or lesser risk of short or long-term health effects include:

- Types of waste burned
- Proximity, amount of time, and frequency of exposure
- Wind direction and other weather-related factors
- Presence of other airborne or environmental hazards in the area

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“ You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending”

- C.S. Lewis



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Many health conditions related to these hazards are temporary and should disappear after the exposure ends. Other longer-term health issues may be caused by a combination of hazardous exposures, injuries, or illnesses you may have experienced during your military service including blast or noise injuries.

Exposure to smoke created by the materials burned may cause irritation and burning of eyes or throat, coughing, breathing difficulties, skin itching or rashes. Many of these conditions are temporary and resolve on their own when the exposure ends. However, if you were closer to burn pit smoke or were exposed for longer periods of time, you may be at greater risk for longer-term health conditions.

The VA strongly encourages all Veterans who are concerned about any kind of hazardous exposure during their military service to talk to their health care provider and apply for VA health care. VA health care is also available for free to combat Veterans [for five years after separation](#) to help ensure continuity of care for health issues related to their military service.

Veterans can also file a claim for compensation and benefits. If you participate in the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR), you may save and submit a copy of your registry questionnaire to support your claim. Through the claims process, VA evaluates Veterans' individual exposures, circumstances of service, and needs.

We encourage all Veterans who are eligible to participate in VA's [AHOBPR](#). By joining the registry you can provide information that can help the VA better understand the long-term effects of burn pit exposures. Even if you have not experienced any symptoms or illnesses you believe are related to burn pit exposure, your participation could help VA provide better care to all Veterans.



F E B R U A R Y

American Heart Month

February has been designated American Heart Month since 1964. According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 630,000 Americans die each year from heart disease, making it the No. 1 killer of both men and women. Each minute, more than one person in the U.S. dies from a heart disease-related event, while every 40 seconds an American experiences a heart attack.

Considering the scope of heart disease in America, it's important to become well aware of the risk factors that negatively affect cardiovascular health. The most prevalent and highly associated risk factors to look for include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and smoking. However, you should also be aware of the effects of diabetes, obesity, diets with poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and substance abuse.

It's just as vital to know what symptoms indicate a cardiac event. While chest pains and discomfort are clear red flags, other symptoms include shortness of breath, nausea, cold sweats, and upper body pain and discomfort in the arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach.

There are a number of steps an individual can take to improve his or her heart health. Cut down on takeout and shop for groceries, walk whenever and wherever you can, schedule an appointment with a doctor, quit smoking, and lose weight.

New Rollout Tool Notifies Veterans When To Expect Their COVID-19 Vaccine

With two COVID-19 vaccines available for emergency use and deliveries starting at VA health care facilities, many Veterans are wondering when they can receive the vaccine. Facilities will notify Veterans at high risk for contracting the virus or those who could develop serious illness about their eligibility and when they can expect to get their vaccine. This is possible because of VA's new data outreach tool.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Outreach for Veterans software program uses data in the VHA Support Service Center (VSSC) databases to find Veterans who are in high-risk groups. Because the vaccines are new and in high demand, quantities are limited. They're being given to the most at-risk groups first.

VA follows the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines to determine who should be offered the vaccine first when supply is limited. Since VA medical records are electronic, facilities can use the VSSC database to sort Veterans by their ages or if they have high-risk conditions. It can then provide medical facilities with a list of Veterans who should be offered vaccine first.

VSSC worked with the COVID-19 Vaccine Project National Integrated Project Team (IPT) Prioritization Group to develop the tool and ensure that Veterans could be easily identified based on age or underlying conditions. The tool uses patient identifiers to show a patient's medical conditions, age, gender, and serious and pre-existing health conditions. It also shows current disease treatments, such as chemotherapy or dialysis, and other risk factors for severe COVID-19, such as smoking or obesity.

A patient's medical record can reveal a patient's interest in receiving the vaccine. It also contains contact information so their local facility can notify them of their prioritized eligibility. Veterans may be notified by their local facility using traditional mailing or electronic notification systems. These systems include VEText or My HealtheVet. Veterans also may receive calls from patient case managers.

The CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has multiple phases for the vaccine based on availability. Most VA facilities are in the first phase (Phase 1a), which ensures the most vulnerable people get the vaccine first. VA facilities can start offering vaccines to those covered under Phase 1b of the CDCs [allocation guidelines](#) when they have made good progress through Phase 1a.

Veterans who would be eligible in Phase 1b due to their profession may have access to the vaccine through their place of work before enough vaccine is available through VA. All Veterans and staff are encouraged to get vaccinated at their first available opportunity. For example, their state may offer them the vaccine before VA does. You can provide a picture of the COVID-19 vaccination card to your VA provider through secure messaging and request it be added to your records. The VA encourages Veterans to get the COVID vaccine as soon as it becomes available to them. This is the best path forward and the best way to protect you and your family.

VA is currently providing vaccines at more than 215 sites nationally with plans to expand to additional sites as vaccine supplies increase. As with states distributing vaccines, VA is currently in the limited supply phase, anticipating an increase in weekly vaccine doses in March. Until VA receives an increase in vaccines, many facilities may temporarily run out of vaccines for short periods of time.

Updates on COVID-19 information will be posted on the VA [Access to Care](#) website. Also, information on COVID-19 vaccines at the VA can be found [here](#).

Upcoming Events

What is VITA?

VITA = Volunteer Income Tax Assistance

The mission of the program, which is coordinated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), is to provide free basic tax return preparation for low-to-moderate income and elderly taxpayers. The VITA program has operated for over 50 years, offering free tax help to qualified individuals:

- People who generally make \$56,000 or less
- Persons with disabilities;
- Limited English-speaking taxpayers who need assistance in preparing their own tax returns.

UW-Oshkosh site: Appointments available from February 13 to April 3, 2021. UW-O offers the VITA program (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) that provides free basic tax return preparation for low-to-moderate income and elderly taxpayers. The program is run by student and other community volunteers. Please call [920.424.3486](tel:920.424.3486) to schedule an appointment.

Goodwill Menasha site: Valet VITA in-person assistance. Schedule a 20 minute drop-off appointment online at: <https://www.goodwillncw.org/vita/valet/schedule/>. Meet with an intake specialist and let our IRS-certified volunteers prepare your return. Pick up your return when it's ready (typically 5-7 business days). We are located inside the Goodwill Retail Store and Training Center at 1800 Appleton Road, Menasha, WI 54952. If you need more info, call (920)968-6044.



CONTACT US

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Veterans Service Office**

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**Stay informed about benefits; join our e-mail list.
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**For a list of more events,
check out our calendar!**

ST. ANNE'S CLINIC

**449 HIGH AVE.
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*Providing quality health care with compassion to
the uninsured and underinsured*

- Primary care
- Health promotion
- Disease prevention
- Chronic disease management
- Acute illness management
- Mental health (on-site counseling)
- AA meetings Saturdays 10am-11am

**TUESDAYS 12:00PM - 4:00PM
SATURDAYS 10:00AM - 2:00PM**

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