

Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans Illnesses  
Recommendation Regarding Gulf War Illness Case Definition  
Adopted, February 4, 2013

The Committee recommends that VA ORD sponsor a joint effort with the Gulf War Illness (GWI) Research Program at the Department of Defense's Office of Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP) to establish an expert consensus and evidence-based case definition for Gulf War illness. This joint effort should include, at minimum: (1) a review of existing literature relevant to case definitions for GWI, (2) in-depth statistical and epidemiologic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of different case definition approaches using datasets that provide representative data on symptoms and medical conditions affecting 1990-1991 Gulf War era veterans, and (3) final case definition parameters and guidelines developed by an expert consensus panel that includes scientists experienced in GWI research and symptom-based case definitions and veterans affected by GWI.

The Committee emphasizes the importance of establishing a case definition specific to the illness resulting from military service in the 1990-1991 Gulf War, in order to provide homogeneous case groups for research studies. While poorly understood illnesses are known to affect many other populations, the environmental conditions and experiences encountered in the 1991 Gulf War theater are distinct from etiologic factors associated with other symptom-defined conditions, for example, those that follow infection, injury, occupational hazards, as well as ambient cases of unknown etiology. In addition, recent studies have identified a variety of biological differences that distinguish GWI from other multisymptom conditions. Until objective diagnostic tests can be identified for Gulf War illness, it is essential that a symptom-based case definition be established that best characterizes the symptom profile that has been consistently and specifically associated with military service in the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

The Committee strongly urges that the Gulf War illness case definition effort be conducted in cooperation with CDMRP, which supports the majority of federally-funded GWI research. CDMRP is currently sponsoring two large research projects aimed at determining current symptom profiles of Gulf War era veterans, to be used in optimizing a GWI case definition. The Committee also endorses the general process for establishing a GWI case definition outlined in VA's Draft Strategic Plan for Gulf War Illness Research [reviewed by the Committee at meetings held in January and June 2012]. This process provides for a case definition that is both evidence-based and developed by a consensus panel of experts, and will maximize both the scientific value and acceptability of the case definition.