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VA, NIH launch study of Gulf War Illness

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs and National Institutes of Health [began a joint, five-year study](#) that aims to explain the chronic symptoms of [Gulf War Illness](#). The study may lead to more definitive diagnostic criteria for Gulf War Illness, development of new diagnostic testing, and potential treatments.

Gulf War Illness affects multiple systems in the body and includes chronic symptoms such as fatigue, headache, memory and cognitive difficulties, joint and muscle pain, poor sleep, and problems with gastrointestinal and respiratory function. This disease affects about a third of the nearly 700,000 men and women who served in the Persian Gulf during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

This week, the first Veteran arrived at the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, to participate in the study. Veterans who served in the Gulf War and [meet the enrollment criteria](#) can inquire about participating in the study by emailing vhawas.indepth@va.gov.

“Effective treatments for Gulf War Illness have remained elusive, forcing health care providers to mostly focus on easing patient symptoms,” said **VA Chief Research and Development Officer Rachel Ramoni, DMD, ScD**. “VA and NIH’s collaboration will bring together experts who will meticulously investigate the underlying causes of Gulf War Illness symptoms. With the help of the Veterans who volunteer for the study, researchers will lay the groundwork for care that will meaningfully improve the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Veterans living with this disease.”

“This is an important collaboration that we hope will lead to many answers to those suffering from Gulf War Illness,” said **Director of National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke Walter Koroshetz, M.D.** “Taking advantage of the resources available only at NIH, this comprehensive study will take a new look at this illness and uncover biological mechanisms that may pave the way to treatments.”

VA researchers will screen 1990-91 era Gulf War Veterans through the Miami VA Medical Center and the California and Washington, D.C., sites of VA’s [War Related Illness and Injury Study Center](#). Veterans will then be referred to NIH to gain more insight into Gulf War Illness. NIH researchers will identify how the illness presents itself — in ways that can be measured or observed — in each participant. The research will focus on the immune and autonomic nervous systems, as well as the body’s energy-production pathways.

[Eligible](#) Veterans will visit the [NIH Clinical Center](#) for up to two weeks, with most Veterans staying at the Clinical Center. Travel arrangements to and from the Clinical Center will be coordinated with the patient and the study team. Comprehensive testing will be done during the 14 days to look at multiple body systems affected by Gulf War Illness and how these systems operate functionally and structurally at rest as well as when the body is placed under stressors. Among other tests, researchers will administer a peak exercise challenge to trigger symptom flares. The procedure has been used to explore the mechanisms of other chronic illnesses, such as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome.

VA researchers will maintain a data repository of participants, oversee Veterans’ overall experience in the study, and help to communicate individual participants’ study findings to their VA care providers as needed.

Learn more about the [Gulf War Illness study](#) here.

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