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8.1 Veteran's Physical Health by Service Era: Cold War to the Afghanistan War

Authors

Maria M. Rossi, PhD,

Jon Parker, MAMFT, NCC, LPC, LMHC

Heidi Radunovich, PhD, Licensed Psychologist

Michelle A. Parisi, PhD, RDN

Cold War to the Afghanistan War

The history of wars from the Cold War to the Afghanistan War spans the years from 1945 to 2021 (Figure 8.2a).

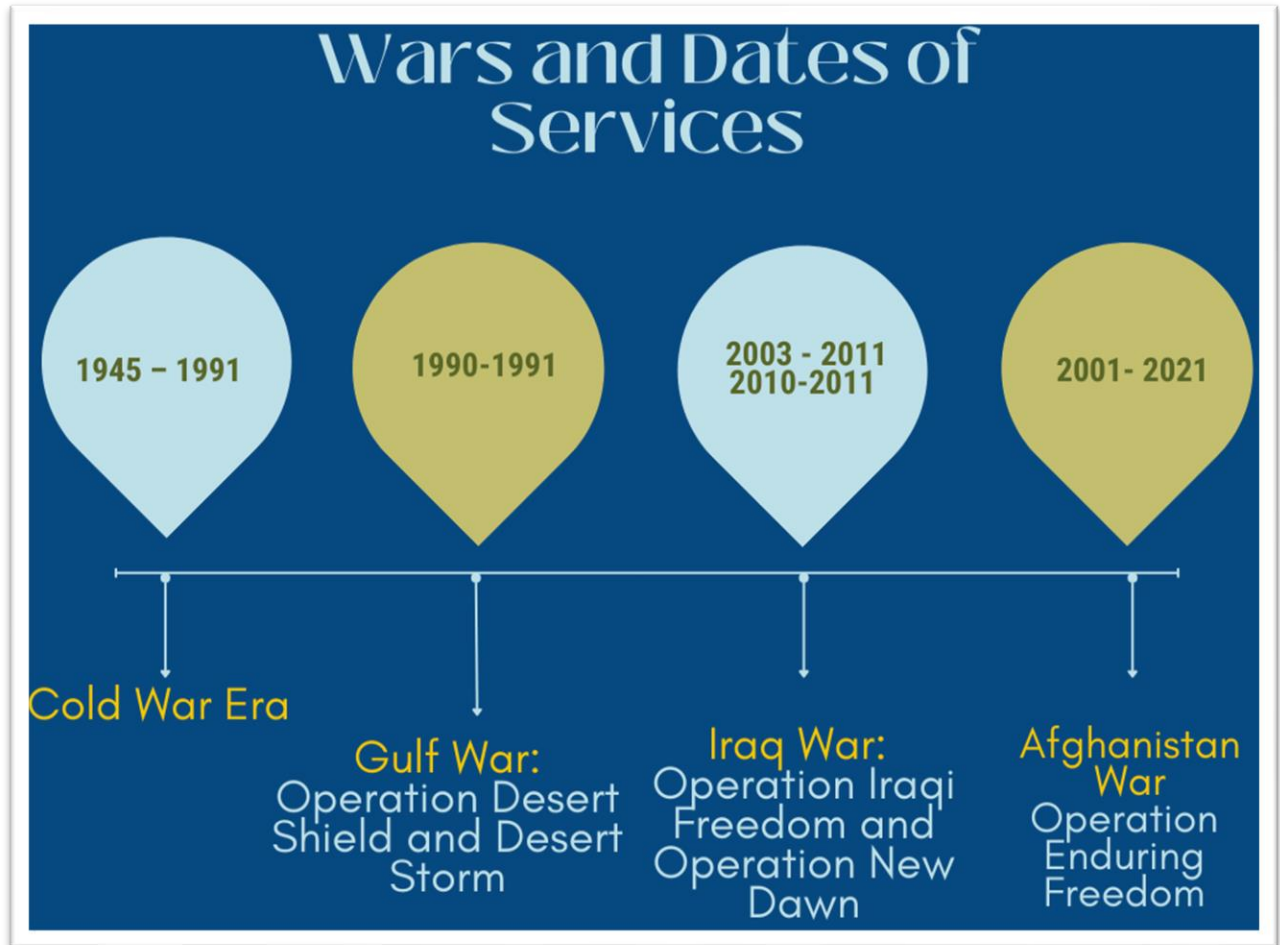


Figure 8.1a

From the Cold War to the Afghanistan War—Dates of Service

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a

Cold War

An alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union was created after Germany invaded the URSS and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Competition between the allies increased as World War II transformed both countries, turning the nations into formidable world powers. After the defeat of the Axis powers, an ideological and political rivalry between the United States and the USSR led to the start of the Cold War. A race for superior military power led to an era of espionage, wars over the spread of communism, and a buildup of nuclear arms that threatened global annihilation (Burton, n.d.; Collins, 2019).

Veterans who served during the Cold War era—anytime between 1945 and 1991 may be at risk of health conditions listed in figure 8.1b.



Figure 8.1b

Health Issues and Risks Cold War Veterans

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022

If Veterans were assigned to specific projects or locations, they might be at risk of illnesses caused by exposure to different hazards:

Projects 112 or Shipboard Hazard and Defense are examples of military chemical and biological warfare exposure. These projects were designed for materials testing from the 1960s to 1970s.

The Atsugi Waste Incinerator exposed the military to combustion waste disposal, where industrial and medical waste was burned.

The Edgewood/Aberdeen Experiments occurred from 1955 to 1975. These experiments were classified as medical studies of low-dose chemical agents.

Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station at New River are military training sites where it was determined that the drinking water was contaminated from August 1953 through December 1987.

Fort McClellan is the site of possible exposure to low levels of radioactivity, chemical warfare agents (e.g., mustard gas and nerve agents) and airborne polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022a).

The Gulf War

The first Gulf War was an armed conflict between Iraq and an international coalition consisting of the NATO allies and Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt to oppose Iraqi aggression (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The coalition's efforts against Iraq were carried out in two key phases: Operation Desert Shield (ODS), which marked the military buildup from August 1990 to January 1991, and Operation Desert Storm (ODS), which began with the aerial bombing campaign against Iraq on January 17, 1991, and ended with the Liberation of Kuwait on February 28, 1991 (Collins, 2019).

Specific health conditions are associated with military operations during the Gulf War, from August 2, 1990, to the present. Medically unexplained illnesses, commonly known as Gulf War syndrome or Chronic Multi-symptom illness, are of substantial concern for some Veterans who served during the Gulf War in Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2010) and Operation New Dawn (2010-2011) that exposed Veterans to sand dust, oil wells fires and other irritants and toxins (Figure 8.1c)

Symptoms of Gulf Syndrome may include fatigue, headaches, joint pain, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory disorders, and memory problems.

Other infectious diseases Veterans of this era might be at risk for:

Malaria—an infectious disease transmitted by mosquitoes. Symptoms include chills, fever, and sweats.

Brucellosis—a bacterial disease with symptoms such as profuse sweating and joint and muscle pain. The illness may be chronic and persist for years.

Campylobacter Jejuni—an infectious disease with symptoms such as abdominal pain, diarrhea, and fever.

Coxiella Burnetii (Q Fever)—a bacterial infection with symptoms like fever, severe headache, and gastrointestinal problems such as nausea and diarrhea. People who develop severe disease may experience infection of the lungs (pneumonia) or liver (hepatitis). Chronic Q fever is a more severe infection that can develop months or years following initial Q fever conditions; the illness may cause an infection of one or more heart valves.

Mycobacterium Tuberculosis —a disease that affects the lungs and causes symptoms such as chest pain, persistent cough (sometimes bloody), weight loss and fever.

Nontyphoid Salmonella—a bacterial infection characterized by nausea, abdominal cramps, vomiting, and acute diarrhea.

Shigella—a bacterial infection with symptoms like fever, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Visceral Leishmaniasis—a parasitic disease with symptoms such as fever, weight loss, enlargement of the spleen and liver, and anemia.

West Nile Virus—a disease transmitted by mosquitoes with symptoms like fever, headache, muscle pain or weakness, nausea, and vomiting (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022b).

To find possible long-term health problems related to Gulf War service, the VA offers eligible Veterans a free Gulf War Registry health exam.

[Gulf War Illnesses](https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/index.asp)

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/index.asp>

Afghanistan War

The Afghanistan War, commonly known as the War in Afghanistan, began in response to the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, in New York City. It ended in 2021 with the withdrawal of the United States and allied troops from Afghanistan (Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, n.d.)

If a Veteran served in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) at any time after October 7, 2001, they might be at risk of certain health conditions:

Health problems caused by toxic chemicals or other hazardous materials in the environment (Figure 8.1c).

Sand, dust, pollution, and other airborne particulates: Larger particles, such as sand, can be caught and expelled quickly, but tiny, fine particles may cause more severe health problems because they can be inhaled deep into the lungs and airways. These extremely small particles and liquid droplets can include acids, chemicals, metals, soil or dust (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023d).

Airborne hazards and burn pit smoke: Airborne hazards are contaminants or potentially toxic substances that Veterans were exposed to through the air they breathed. Smoke from open-air pits is often used to eliminate waste (e.g., chemicals, paints, munitions, and other substances) at military sites in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b).

Depleted uranium: Uranium is commonly used for the armor in military tanks and on some bullets. It is a cause for health concern if it enters the body through embedded fragments, contaminated wounds, and inhalation or ingestion. The potential for health effects is correlated to the amount of internal exposure to uranium (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023c)

Injuries caused by:

Extreme cold: Health problems (like skin cancer in frostbite scars or pain, tingling, or numbness in the fingers and toes) caused by the effects of cold climates

Extreme heat: Health problems (like heat stroke, heat exhaustion, and sunburn) that can be caused by serving in hot desert climates

Toxic embedded fragments: Shrapnel and other metals (some containing chemicals) that stay in your body after an injury and can cause injury at the site of the fragment or in other parts of your body

Explosions: Explosions that can cause concussions and traumatic brain injury (TBI), an injury to the head that affects the way your brain works

Noise: Harmful sounds from guns, explosives, rockets, heavy weapons, jets and aircraft, and machinery that can cause or contribute to hearing loss and tinnitus (ringing in the ears)

Rabies: A disease that you get from a bite or contact with saliva from an infected animal

Occupational (job-related) hazards: Chemicals, paints, radiation, and other hazards you may have come in contact with through your military job

Side effects of Mefloquine Lariam® is a drug given to military personnel to help protect against malaria, an infectious disease transmitted by mosquitoes (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022c).

Gulf War	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operation Desert Shield &• Operation Desert Storm
Iraqi War	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operation Iraqi Freedom &• Operation New Dawn
Afghanistan War	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operation Enduring Freedom
Health Issues and Possible Risks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sand, dust, & particulates• Burn pit smoke• Depleted uranium• Sulfur fire• Chemical warfare agents• Chromium• Extreme heat• Toxic embedded fragments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explosions/Noise• Traumatic Brain Injury• Infectious diseases/Rabies• Occupational (job-related) hazards• Side effects of Mefloquine (brand name: Lariam)• Vaccinations/Pyridostigmine bromide

Figure 8.1c

Health Issues and Risks Gulf War Veterans, Iraqi War Veterans, Afghanistan War Veterans

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022; 2023.

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