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Office of Rural Health

8.2 Veterans' Physical Health by Service Era: World War II to the Vietnam War

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Chronology of Conflicts

Different health conditions might affect Veterans depending on the time and location where Veterans had served. The history of wars and dates of services in chronological order from World War II to the Vietnam War span from 1939-1975 (Figure 8.2a).

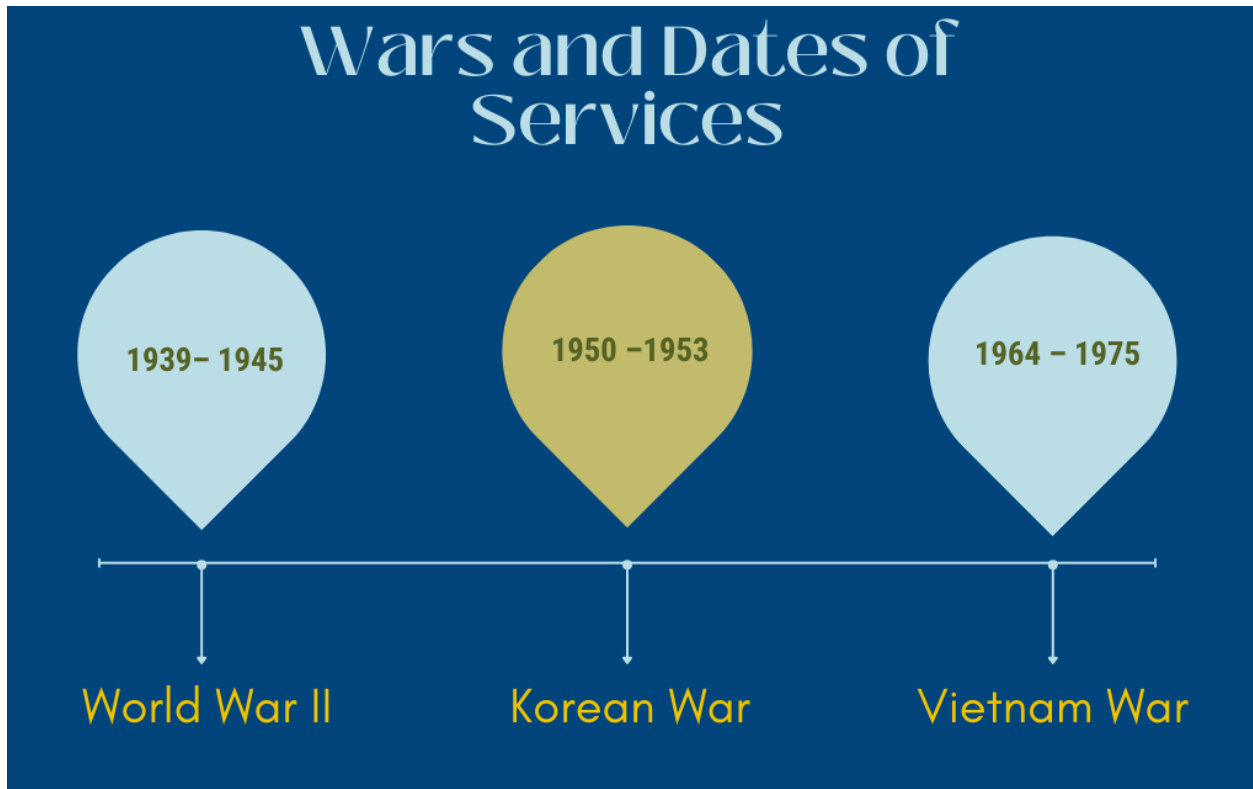


Figure 8.2a

From World II to the Vietnam War—Dates of Service

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a

World War II

In December 1941, following the bombing of the U.S. military naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii by Japanese forces, the United States formally declared war on Japan. Within days, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S., leading the nation to fully engage in the Second World War.

If a Veteran had served time between September 1, 1939, and September 2, 1945— during World War II, they might be affected by noise, extreme cold, mustard gas and other health hazards (Figure 8.1b)



Figure 8.2b

Health Issues and Risks For World War II Veterans

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b

Today, World War II Veterans are over the age of 70. In addition to the typical diseases associated with aging, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, or dementia (including Alzheimer's), these Veterans might have been exposed to various factors during their military service, leading to long-lasting health effects extreme weather during their military service, leading to long-lasting health effects (We Honor Veterans, n.d.).

Frost bite/Cold injuries:

The risk of health effects from extreme weather will depend on factors like temperature, wind, and moisture, combined with physical activity, the duration of exposure, and the amount of protection worn during deployment (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b). Veterans who served between December 1944 and January 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge are at the highest risk of long-lasting extreme weather effects (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b; We Honor Veterans, n.d.), which might include:

- ◆ Changes in muscle, skin, nails, ligaments, and bones due to severe cold weather
- ◆ Skin cancer in frostbite scars
- ◆ Neurologic injury with symptoms such as episodes of pain in limbs, hot or cold tingling sensations, and numbness
- ◆ Vascular injury with Reynaud's phenomenon with symptoms such as extremities becoming painful and white or discolored when cold
- ◆ The Veterans would be at higher risk if they served anytime between December 1944 and January 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b; We Honor Veterans, n.d.).

Additional exposures that may affect long-term health include:

- ◆ **Ionizing Radiation** may occur from radiation exposure through atmospheric and underground nuclear weapons testing or other activities during military service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023c).
- ◆ **Occupational Hazards Exposures** might include exposure to other chemicals, paints, and asbestos paints (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022b).
- ◆ **Mustard Gas** is yellow-brown gas that smells like mustard, garlic, or horseradish. However, in its pure form, which is at room temperature, it is almost odorless liquid. It's a poisonous gas that was used in combat during World War II (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022b).

- ◆ **Infectious diseases** that military personnel may have been exposed to during WWII include tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, hepatitis, and tropical diseases. Rates of these diseases were high and became the prime reason for residual disability and time lost from duty (We Honor Veterans, n.d.).
- ◆ **Exposure to Nuclear Weapons** may have occurred during weapons testing in Nevada and the Pacific Ocean between 1945 and 1962. Military personnel deployed for **Nuclear Cleanup** may have been exposed as well. Between August 6, 1945, and July 1, 1946, Veterans who were involved in the occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, and those who were prisoners of war in Japan during World War II may have participated in nuclear cleanup (We Honor Veterans, (n.d.)).

Korean War

The Korean War was fought on June 25, 1950, to July 27, 1953. It is often called the “Forgotten War” because World War II and Vietnam vastly outweighed it. This conflict marked the first evident battle of the Cold War. Tensions were high between the Communist East and the Democratic West, and the Korean War deepened the mistrust between the two sides.

Korean War Veterans who served from 1950 to 1953 may be at risk of certain health conditions (We Honor Veterans, n.d.a) due to a variety of health risks (Figure 8.2c).

Figure 8.2c: *Health Issues and Possible Risks for Korean War Veterans*

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022



Like WWII Veterans, those from the Korean War may have experienced exposure to extreme cold. Medical records of cold injuries are no longer available or might have never been made. Despite this, healthcare professionals who care for Veterans of the Korean War should recognize long-term and delayed symptoms. Peripheral neuropathy, skin cancer in frostbite scars in heels and earlobes, arthritis in involved areas, chronic tinea pedis (Athlete’s foot), fallen arches and stiff toes, nocturnal pain, and cold sensitization are symptoms that may worsen with age. These symptoms can drastically complicate chronic conditions such as diabetes and peripheral vascular disease, increasing risk for amputations (We Honor Veterans, n.d.a).

Vietnam War


The Vietnam War was the most unpopular and longest war that American service members ever fought (We Honor Veterans, n.d.b). According to law, their involvement in Vietnam was from 1957 until 1975 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).


More than two and a half million Americans served in Vietnam, and more than 58,000 servicemen and women lost their lives during the Vietnam War. The social unrest added more stress to the already difficult conditions that Veterans suffered after traumatic events experienced during combat.


Figure 8.2d: Health Issues and Risks for Vietnam War Veterans
Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022a


Health Issues & Risks

- Diseases related to Agent Orange
- Hepatitis C
- Noise-related injuries (hearing loss, Tinnitus)
- Illnesses or injuries caused by occupational (job-related) hazards
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder









After the war, many Veterans encountered difficulties in adjusting to civilian life and experienced adverse health effects, many of which were attributed to Agent Orange (We Honor Veterans, n.d.b). Other health hazards included hepatitis C, noise and PTSD (Figure 8.2d).

In addition to Agent Orange, the U.S. military used different types of herbicides for defoliation and crop destruction during the war. Veterans who served time from January 9, 1962, to May 7, 1975, are presumed to have been exposed to herbicides. Exposure to Agent Orange caused long-term health effects for those who were exposed. The VA recognizes that certain cancers and other health problems that are associated with exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service. These include bladder cancer, chronic B-cell leukemia, Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, prostate cancer, respiratory cancers (including lung cancer), and some soft tissue sarcomas. The VA also recognizes increased rates of amyloidosis, chloracne, type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, hypothyroidism, ischemic heart disease, monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS), Parkinsonism, Parkinson's disease, peripheral neuropathy, Porphyria cutanea tarda and Lou Gehrig's Disease. The VA also assumes that certain congenital defects in children of Vietnam and Korean Veterans are associated with their military service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023d).

Vietnam Veterans are also at higher risk of developing Hepatitis C, an infectious disease transmittable through blood. It affects the liver, causing inflammation and eventually damage (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2019).

[Exposure to Agent Orange](https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/publications/newsletter-archive)

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/publications/newsletter-archive>.

These newsletters provide information for Veterans and their families related to concerns about Agent Orange exposure and locations of V.A. programs that respond to those concerns.

Vietnam Veterans could also have hearing problems caused by noise, such as the sounds from guns, explosives, rockets, heavy weapons, jets and aircraft, and machinery that can cause or contribute to hearing loss and tinnitus, which is ringing in the ears (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022a). Health issues and risks for Vietnam Veterans include agent-related diseases, post-traumatic stress disorder, tinnitus and hepatitis C (Figure 8.2d).

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