

Nearly 40 Percent of Vets Report Toxic Exposure

VA screened 1 million veterans last year for toxic exposure as the first step in receiving help from the recently enacted PACT Act

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More than 374,000 veterans who received one of VA's new airborne toxic exposure screenings reported exposure to toxins during their military service, according to a Dec. 29, 2022, VA statement.

In almost 40 percent of those screenings, veterans said they might have been exposed to harmful airborne substances. As of Aug. 15, 2022, there were 9 million veterans enrolled in VA health care.

VA began toxic exposure screenings on Nov. 8, 2022. It is a five-to-10 minute process that is administered to all veterans enrolled in the VA health care system. During screenings, veterans are asked if they were exposed to toxins during their military service. VA health care workers will ask the veteran if he or she encountered toxins such as:

- Burn pits
- Agent Orange
- Radiation
- Contaminated water

“If a veteran has been exposed to toxins during their time of service, VA wants to know,” the department stated. “It not only impacts their individual future care, but it can also improve overall toxic exposure-related care and outcomes.”

VA reported on Jan. 4 that the department had undertaken military toxic exposure screenings for 1 million veterans — about 11 percent of those enrolled in VA health care.

VA Under Secretary of Health Shereef Elnahal said it was an “incredible breakthrough” for

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VA to reach the milestone in such a short length of time.

“These screenings are paramount to improving the health outcomes for veterans and providing them with the health care and benefits they’ve earned as quickly as possible,” Elnahal said. “This is among the first steps we have taken to deliver even more benefits and health care to veterans who have been exposed to toxins during their service.”

On Jan. 1, VA began processing all disability claims related to the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, which was signed into law by President Joe Biden on Aug. 10, 2022. The law aims to provide expanded access to VA health care and disability benefits to veterans harmed by toxins. The Honoring Our PACT Act also added 23 respiratory illnesses and cancers related to airborne hazards exposure as presumptive conditions.

“We at VA are ready to process these claims and deliver PACT Act-related care and benefits to toxic-exposed veterans and their survivors,” VA Secretary Denis McDonough said. “To all veterans and survivors: Don’t wait, apply now — we will get you the care and benefits.”

This article is featured in the 2023 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.