



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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Fact Sheet

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VA Programs For Veterans Exposed To Radiation

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides special health care services to certain veterans who were exposed to radiation while on active duty. These veterans are also eligible for the other benefits offered by VA to most veterans, such as home loan guarantees, educational payments and, in certain circumstances, survivor benefits.

"Atomic Veterans"

People who were exposed to radiation during their military services are often referred to as "atomic veterans." That is an unofficial term. To qualify for VA's special program for veterans exposed to radiation, people must meet very precise eligibility criteria that are based upon federal law or department regulations. This includes veterans who:

- Participated in atmospheric and certain underground nuclear tests;
- Took part in the American occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan;
- Certain veterans who were POWs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; or
- Served at gaseous diffusion plants in Paducah, Ky., Portsmouth, Ohio, and area K25 at Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Veterans who participated in these radiation-risk activities are eligible to take part in the VA ionizing radiation registry examination program. VA also provides compensation to veterans and their survivors if the veteran has a disability that is associated with these events.

Radiation Statistics

About 195,000 service members participated in the post-World War II occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, or were prisoners of war there. Over 95 percent of them received doses below 0.1 rem, a standard measurement of radiation exposure. Only those

Nagasaki occupation forces that regularly entered the Nishiyama area had the potential to receive doses up to 1 rem.

In addition, approximately 210,000 service members took part in atmospheric nuclear tests between 1945 and 1962 in the United States, the Pacific and the Atlantic. Less than 1 percent of them received doses greater than 5 rem per year, the current federal occupational radiation dose limit. The average radiation dose received by participants was about 0.6 rem.

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency's Nuclear Test Personnel Review program has maintained a database of participants in U.S. atmospheric nuclear test activities since 1978.

Determination of Service-Connected Diseases

VA provides disability compensation to radiation-exposed veterans and their survivors for radiogenic diseases under the following two programs:

- **Presumptive Program.** Veterans who participated in nuclear tests by the U.S. including certain underground tests at Amchitka Island, Alaska, prior to January 1, 1974, or who served with the U.S. occupation forces in Hiroshima or Nagasaki, Japan, between August 1945 and July 1946, or who were prisoners of war in Japan, or some who served at the gaseous diffusion plants listed above are eligible for compensation for cancers specified in federal law or departmental regulations.

The 21 types of cancer covered under the presumptive program are: all forms of leukemia except chronic lymphocytic leukemia; cancer of the thyroid, bone, brain, breast, colon, lung, ovary, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, pancreas, bile ducts, gall bladder, salivary gland and urinary tract (kidneys, renal pelvis, ureter, urinary bladder and urethra); lymphomas (except Hodgkin's disease); multiple myeloma; primary liver cancer; and bronchio-alveolar carcinoma (a rare lung cancer).

Non-presumptive Program. For potentially radiation-related diseases or for types of exposures not covered in the presumptive program, regulations provide for consideration

of disability compensation claims from veterans exposed to radiation during military service. Under the non-presumptive program, additional factors must be considered to determine service-connection, including amount of radiation exposure, duration of exposure and elapsed time between exposure and onset of disease.

VA regulations define all cancers as potentially radiogenic, as well as certain other non-malignant conditions, such as posterior subcapsular cataracts; non-malignant thyroid nodular disease; parathyroid adenoma; and tumors of the brain and central nervous system.

Claims for disability compensation may be filed at a VA regional office. Veterans or their survivors can reach a regional office by calling 1-800-827-1000. The Defense Department maintains a helpline at 1-800-462-3683 to provide veterans with information about their test participation.

Rates of Disability Compensation

Rates of compensation depend upon the degree of disability and follow a payment schedule that applies to all veterans. Current rates are listed in VA's handbook, "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents," and are available on the Web by following the compensation link at <http://www.va.gov/>.

For deaths in 1993 and after, compensation to survivors is paid at a flat rate regardless of the deceased veteran's rank in the military. An additional amount may be paid if the veteran had been rated 100-percent disabled for service-connected disabilities for at least eight years before death and had been married to the surviving spouse during the same period. Additional amounts also may be paid to the surviving spouse for dependent minor children.

Ionizing Radiation Registry Program

In addition to special eligibility to enroll for VA health care for potentially radiation-related conditions, veterans who participated in radiation-risk activities are eligible to participate in VA's Ionizing Radiation Registry examination. Under this program, VA will perform a complete physical examination for each veteran who requests it if the

veteran participated in atmospheric and certain underground nuclear weapons testing, if he or she served with the U.S. occupation forces in Hiroshima or Nagasaki or was a POW there, or served at one of the gaseous diffusion plants listed previously. Veterans do not need to be enrolled for general VA care to be eligible for the Ionizing Radiation Registry.

As of June 2002, VA records show 22,503 veterans had received this special examination.

Medical Care

Under Public Law 104-262, "The Veterans Health Reform Act," VA allocates health care resources by using seven priority groups. According to the law, veterans exposed to radiation-risk activities seeking care for conditions associated with their exposure to ionizing radiation are included in Priority Group 6. Care is provided for these radiation-related conditions without regard to the veteran's age, service-connected status or ability to defray the cost of medical care, and no co-payment by the veteran is required.

In other words, even if an eligible veteran has never filed a compensation claim or if the claim has been denied, the veteran can still receive free health care, as resources permit, for conditions recognized by VA as potentially caused by radiation.

When veterans with radiation-related claims qualify for disability compensation, their priority would be even higher -- in Groups 1, 2 or 3 -- depending on the severity of the illness.

More information about VA health care eligibility and enrollment is available on the Internet at <http://www.va.gov/pubaff/enroll.htm>.

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