War Syndromes and Their Evaluation: From the U.S. Civil War to the Persian Gulf War

Abstract

Purpose: To better understand the health problems of veterans of the Persian Gulf War by analyzing previous war-related illnesses and identifying possible unifying factors.

Data Source: English-language articles and books on war-related illnesses published since 1863 that were located primarily through a manual search of bibliographies.

Data Extraction: Publications were assessed for information on the clinical characteristics of war-related illnesses and the research methods used to evaluate such illnesses.

Data Synthesis: Poorly understood war syndromes have been associated with armed conflicts at least since the U.S. Civil War. Although these syndromes have been characterized by similar symptoms (fatigue, shortness of breath, headache, sleep disturbance, forgetfulness, and impaired concentration), no single recurring illness that is unrelated to psychological stress is apparent. However, many types of illness were found among evaluated veterans, including well-defined medical and psychiatric conditions, acute combat stress reaction, post-traumatic stress disorder, and possibly the chronic fatigue syndrome. No single disease is apparent, but one unifying factor stands out: A unique population was intensely scrutinized after experiencing an exceptional, life-threatening set of exposures. As a result, research efforts to date have been unable to conclusively show causality, have been subject to reporting bias, and have lacked similar control populations. In addition to research limitations, war syndromes have involved fundamental, unanswered questions about the importance of chronic somatic symptoms and the factors that create a personal sense of ill health.

Conclusion: Until we can better understand what constitutes health and illness in all adult populations, we risk repeated occurrences of unexplained symptoms among veterans after each war.
Unexplained Suffering in the Aftermath of War
*Annals of Internal Medicine;* 142 (11): 938-939

The Health of Gulf War Veterans
*Annals of Internal Medicine;* 142 (11): i-22

In veterans with PTSD, mindfulness-based group therapy reduced symptom severity
*Annals of Internal Medicine;* 163 (12): JC9

Obstructive sleep apnea in US veterans was associated with increased mortality and morbidity
*Annals of Internal Medicine;* 163 (6): JC12

Care of Returning Military Personnel
*Annals of Internal Medicine;* 159 (1): ITC1-1

Mental health in spouses of U.S. Gulf War veterans.
*Psychiatry Res* 2019;

Pyridostigmine bromide and stress interact to impact immune function, cholinergic neurochemistry and behavior in a rat model of Gulf War Illness.
*Brain Behav Immun* 2019.
Gulf War syndrome, officially known as Gulf War illnesses and chronic multisymptom illness, is a chronic and multisymptomatic disorder affecting returning military veterans and civilian workers of the Persian Gulf War of 1990 and 1991. A wide range of acute and chronic symptoms have been linked to it, including fatigue, muscle pain, cognitive problems, rashes and diarrhea. Approximately 250,000 of the 697,000 U.S. veterans who served in the 1991 Gulf War are afflicted with enduring chronic multi...