



Systematic reviews of psychological disorders, multisymptom illness and chronic fatigue syndrome in veterans deployed to the Gulf War, Afghanistan or Iraq War

- Aim: To compare rates of psychological and other disorders in Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans with military comparison groups not deployed to those conflicts.
- Method: Review of international literature, screening of studies, assessment and pooling of results (where appropriate).

Research organisations

- Monash University and University of Melbourne.

Key findings

Compared to military comparison groups, the likelihood of experiencing the following conditions was higher for Gulf War and Afghanistan / Iraq War veterans:

- Depression;
- Posttraumatic stress disorder;
- Alcohol use disorder;
- Substance use disorders; and
- Generalised anxiety disorder.

Gulf War veterans were also more likely than comparison groups to experience:

- Multisymptom illness; and
- Chronic fatigue syndrome.

Support

- DVA General Enquiries; 133 254 | GeneralEnquiries@dva.gov.au
- At Ease mental health portal; www.at-ease.dva.gov.au
- Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS); call 1800 011 046 (24/7) or visit www.vvcs.gov.au.

Systematic reviews of psychological disorders, multisymptom illness and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) in veterans deployed to the Gulf War, Afghanistan or Iraq War

This study reviewed Australian and international literature to compare rates of psychological disorders (depression, posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD], alcohol use disorders, substance use disorders, generalised anxiety disorder [GAD]), multisymptom illness and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) in Gulf War and Afghanistan/Iraq War veterans with military comparison groups not deployed to those conflicts.

The scientific literature was searched for published and unpublished studies from 1 January 1990 to 24 January 2014 in multiple electronic databases. After studies generated by the search were assessed against inclusion criteria, forty-nine eligible articles were included in the final analysis. These articles covered studies from the United States of America (US), United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Germany, and Canada.

The reviews of the published studies found that:

- Veterans of the Gulf War, Afghanistan or Iraq War were more likely to experience depression, PTSD, GAD, alcohol use disorder and substance use disorder than military comparison groups.
- Gulf War veterans were more likely to experience multisymptom illness and CFS than military comparison groups.
- Pooled results across the published literature indicated that Gulf War veterans had an elevated risk of experiencing PTSD and GAD compared to Afghanistan/Iraq War veterans.

There were no studies identified using the search strategy that investigated multisymptom illness and CFS in Afghanistan/Iraq War veterans.

Results were also examined between reservists and regular personnel for two psychological outcomes. There were no

significant differences in the likelihood of PTSD between these two groups for Gulf, Afghanistan or Iraq War veterans. Afghanistan/Iraq War reservists had a slightly elevated risk of experiencing alcohol use disorders compared to regular personnel but this difference was not statistically significant.

These systematic reviews had a number of strengths including a comprehensive search strategy, rigorous study selection process, and assessment of the risk of bias. However, some of the analyses were limited by small numbers of studies for particular outcomes, such as substance use disorders and GAD, which restricted statistical power. In addition, the literature often grouped Afghanistan and Iraq veterans together so generally the analysis could not consider them separately or compare them.

These reviews have global relevance because they included studies of veterans from the US, UK, Australia, Germany and Canada. While these systematic reviews accurately summarised current knowledge of these conflicts, cultural and healthcare differences need to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

The findings from this project demonstrate that rates of a number of psychological conditions were elevated in veterans of the Gulf War and the Afghanistan/Iraq War, compared to non-deployed personnel. The reviewers noted the need for further generation and interrogation of research to consider the impact of traumatic brain injury and substance use disorder on mental health, among other factors.

The results of these systematic reviews are available on the DVA website at <http://www.dva.gov.au/health-and-wellbeing/research-and-development/health-studies>. For any enquiries, call the DVA Health Study Information Line on 1800 502 302.