

Facing Up to Burn Pit Consequences: Respiratory Effects

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REPORT



3.5 MILLION SERVICE MEMBERS EXPOSED TO BURN PITS

On the front lines of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in Southwest Asia burn pits were commonly used to dispose of everything—from everyday garbage to chemicals and paint, to plastics and rubber, to medical and human waste. These burn pits were generally lit near where

military personnel lived and worked. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), approximately 3.5 million veterans were exposed to the toxic smoke and particulate matter the burn pits released into the air.

The short-term effects were obvious. Many service members experienced some combination of nausea, headaches, and irritation of the eyes, respiratory tract, nose, and throat.

Now, about twenty years after the beginning of the wars in Southwest Asia, the long-term effects are becoming clearer. “Exposures to high levels of specific, individual chemicals that may be present in burn pit smoke have been shown to cause long-term effects on the skin, respiratory system, eyes, liver, kidneys, central nervous system, cardiovascular system, reproductive system, peripheral nervous system, and gastrointestinal tract.” (<https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/education/factsheets/burn-pits.pdf>)

SGT. WESLEY BLACK: THE TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES OF BURN PIT EXPOSURE

On November 7th of this year, Wesley Black, a soldier exposed to burn pits in Afghanistan and Iraq, died of colon cancer. Oncologists have cited burn pit exposure as a likely cause.

Sgt. Black’s case is not merely a tragedy, it is a testimony to the danger of ignoring the effects of burn pit exposure. He died just months after reaching a settlement with the federal government over his diagnosis.

THE RESPIRATORY IMPACTS CAN BE SEVERE

While Sgt. Black was ultimately afflicted with cancer and research is ongoing, chronic respiratory conditions appear to be the most common long-term effects of burn pit exposure. These include:

- **ASTHMA.** The [Open Burn Pit Registry](#) cites asthma as one of burn pit exposure’s most common potential side effects. Exposed veterans who already suffered from asthma and other preexisting conditions may also be more at risk for cancers, respiratory illness, and cardiovascular symptoms.
- **BRONCHITIS.** Some service members and veterans also report suffering from constrictive bronchiolitis, a similar condition that causes the narrowing of the bronchus, making it difficult to breathe.
- **SLEEP APNEA.** While the connection of burn pits to sleep apnea continues to be studied, the condition is one of the more common conditions noted in the burn pit registry.
- **CHRONIC COUGHING, BREATHING DIFFICULTIES, AND THROAT DISCOMFORT.**
- **IDIOPATHIC PULMONARY FIBROSIS.** A rare condition that creates problematic scar tissue within the lungs. The condition can sometimes be slowed down or made less severe with treatment, but it currently has no cure.
- **CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD).**



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Commercial providers bear responsibility for treating burn pit-related conditions.





WHAT TO DO: 5 IMPORTANT ACTIONS


The damage to veterans caused by burn pit exposure will be revealing itself in many ways, in many people, for many years. Action is moving forward at the federal level to enable more veterans to receive benefits related to burn pit exposure. However, because most veterans do not use VA for their healthcare and VA has thus far restricted claims for burn pit exposure for more than 75% of those exposed, it will fall to commercial healthcare providers to identify and treat the symptoms for most of those who suffer. Here is how to begin to live up to that responsibility:

 **ASK THE QUESTION: "HAVE YOU SERVED?"**
Identifying Warrior Community members is the first step to optimal treatment.

 **GO FURTHER: "WHERE DID YOU SERVE?"**
Veterans who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in Southwest Asia are most likely to have been exposed to burn pits.

 **BE ALERT TO SYMPTOMS OF THE RESPIRATORY CONDITIONS LISTED ABOVE.**
When a veteran of the war in Afghanistan presents with a chronic cough, it may easily be more serious than the same symptom in a non-veteran.

 **CONSIDER ADDITIONAL EVALUATION.**
"Veterans who had high and/or frequent burn pit smoke exposure or who have ongoing respiratory symptoms and/or other medical conditions may require medical evaluation including a two-view chest X-ray and complete pulmonary function testing, pre- and post-bronchodilator administration." (<https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/education/factsheets/burn-pits.pdf>)

 **ENCOURAGE ELIGIBLE VETERANS TO JOIN THE OPEN BURN PIT REGISTRY.** VA established the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR) in 2014 to help put data to work for Veterans through research about potential health effects of airborne hazard exposures. Patients who may qualify can find out more here: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>.

NOTE: VA IS PROCESSING SOME BURN-PIT RELATED DISABILITY CLAIMS

VA has begun processing disability claims for asthma, rhinitis, and sinusitis based on presumed exposure to particulate matter. This applies to Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations beginning August 2, 1990, or Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syria, or Djibouti beginning September 19, 2001, and whose conditions came about within 10 years of military service.

Veteran patients who are diagnosed with any of these conditions should be encouraged to file a claim with VA.

[HTTPS://WWW.PUBLICHEALTH.VA.GOV/EXPOSURES/PUBLICATIONS/MILITARY-EXPOSURES/MEYH-5/PRESUMPTIONS.ASP](https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/publications/military-exposures/meyh-5/presumptions.asp)



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P: 833.924.4376 x700

E: admin@warriorcentrichealth.com