

BURN PIT EXPOSURE

- Over 4,000 Canadian Armed Forces members served in the Persian Gulf Region between 1990-1991, and over 40,000 served in the Afghanistan theatre of operations between 2001-2014.
- Burn pits were commonly used on base during these deployments to eliminate various types of waste, due to lack of proper waste disposal facilities and security concerns associated with their establishment.
- Canadian Armed Forces members and Veterans have raised concerns about burn pit exposure during service in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, and are advocating for research into how the health effects of burn pits are impacting Canadian soldiers and Veterans years later.
- Veterans Affairs Canada considers each case individually, based on the specific circumstances and available evidence, and encourages any Veteran or still-serving member with a disability they feel is related to their service, to apply for benefits.
- Veterans Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defence continue to monitor international research on the issue.

WHEN PRESSED:

Q1 – What support does the Department provide today for Veterans suffering from a disability related to burn pit exposure?

Canadian Armed Forces members and Veterans suffering from a disability they feel to be related to their service, are encouraged to apply for VAC's suite of programs, including rehabilitation, health benefits, financial support, and disability benefits.

Q2 – In August 2022, the United States introduced the PACT Act, a law expanding Veterans Affairs health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits, and other toxic substances. Is the Canadian Government willing to support a similar legislation for Veterans in Canada?

Veterans Affairs Canada's existing legislation already allows those whose disabilities are shown to be related to their service to be entitled for disability, healthcare and rehabilitation benefits.

Q3 – What is currently known about the long term health impacts of burn pit exposures on Veterans?

VAC has previously examined mortality rates of Veterans deployed to the Persian Gulf, some of whom were also exposed to burn pits. No difference was observed between Veterans who were deployed versus those not deployed.

VAC closely follows ongoing international initiatives to understand and characterize relationships between burn pits and Veteran health. VAC also leads a Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee Working Group on Military Occupational Exposures and is well connected to member countries' Defence and Veteran administrations on this topic.

Q4 – What is needed to address research gaps in Canada?

Veterans Affairs Canada recognizes that objective, individual-level information on military exposures, preferably collected over the course of an individual's career, is ideal to inform strong population health research regarding questions of causality for Veterans, as well as CAF health protection measures to minimize exposures and health impacts moving forward.

The Department of National Defence is currently working to develop an electronic repository of exposure data, called the Force Health Protection Information Management System (FHPIMS). The intent of this electronic system is to track exposure data for CAF personnel at the individual level over time.

Burn Pit Exposure

Source: Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Date: 2024/11/22

Ongoing collaboration with other external partners (e.g., universities) is key to answering research questions about the long-term health impacts of burn pits and other military occupational exposures on Veteran health outcomes.

Q5 – Are burn pits still used today?

In present day operations, every effort is made to avoid the use of burn pits as a means of waste disposal. The use of open-air burn pits may continue as a short-term solution during contingency operations where no alternative is feasible. For the longer term, incinerators, engineered landfills, or other accepted solid waste management practices are required to be used whenever feasible.

BACKGROUND

Current and Planned Research Initiatives:

Information on burn pit exposures during deployment is not consistently tracked or reported in individual CAF service records, nor is it stored in a searchable format. Consequently, neither VAC nor DND are able to use this information for research purposes.

Veterans Affairs Canada leads and monitors various research initiatives to understand the health impacts of burn pits and other military exposures:

1. Veterans Affairs Canada and DND are collaborating on the Canadian Forces Cancer and Mortality Study (CF-CAMS), a unique 40-year longitudinal cohort of CAF active-duty members and Veterans. The research team is exploring associations between occupational history and cancer incidence in CAF personnel and Veterans, which may provide insights into the effects of deployment and related exposures, such as burn pits.
2. Veterans Affairs Canada leads a Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee Working Group on Military Exposures and is well connected to member countries' Defence and Veteran administrations on this topic.
3. Veterans Affairs Canada closely follows ongoing international initiatives to understand and characterize relationships between burn pits and Veteran health. This includes regular attendance at meetings of the US Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses (scope includes burn pit exposures and impacts on Veteran health), and monitoring of the Australian Repatriation Medical Authority's Statements of Principles, which set out factors that link military service to certain medical conditions, including exposures related to burn pits.

VAC Exposure Disability Benefit Adjudication:

Veterans Affairs Canada's determination of disability benefit eligibility related to burn pit exposure is done on a case-by-case basis, with the determination being made on the individual merits of each case, and based on the evidence available.

There is a VAC policy framework to provide guidance for assessing disability compensation requests pertaining to specific medical conditions and/or hazardous material exposure. The framework consists of two policies:

1. [Assessing and Categorizing Health-Related Expert Opinion\(s\) and Scientific Evidence](#), providing guidance on assessing and categorizing scientific evidence, and a clear evidence threshold standard; and

2. [Hazardous Material and Radiation Exposure](#), providing guidance to Disability Adjudicators on how to interpret evidence, including expert opinion, in the case of hazardous material exposure.

Together, these policies provide for a consistent and transparent approach to these claim types.