

Helping Those Who Serve: Parkinson's Disease Information for the Veterans Community

Parkinson's disease (PD) is a chronic, progressive neurologic disease and a type of movement disorder that can affect the ability to perform common daily activities. PD is associated with a wide range of symptoms that are typically divided into those that affect movement (motor symptoms) and those that do not (non-motor symptoms). The most common motor symptoms of PD are tremor (a form of rhythmic shaking), stiffness or rigidity of the muscles, and slowness of movement (called bradykinesia). A person with PD may also have trouble with posture, balance, coordination, and walking. Common non-motor symptoms of PD include sleep problems, constipation, anxiety, depression, and fatigue, among others.

There are associations between service in the US military and PD that are important for veterans to understand. Because of these connections and because of the need for expert care in the treatment of PD, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) created a nationwide network of centers that specialize in the clinical management of veterans with PD.

PD and Veterans

Veterans may be at an increased risk of PD because of their military service. Evidence suggests two factors that contribute to the risk of PD can be linked to military service – one is head injury and the other is specific environmental exposures.

It is important to note that there are other factors that increase the risk of PD as well, and most people who develop PD do not have a history of head injuries and were not exposed to toxins in the environment linked to increased risk of PD. Yet it is important for veterans to be aware of these potential connections and get the care they are entitled to because of their service.

Environmental Exposures & Service Connections

During the Vietnam War, many soldiers were exposed to Agent Orange, a mix of herbicides that was used by the US military to defoliate trees and remove concealment for the enemy. The **Agent Orange Act** of 1991 stipulated that specific diseases (diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers) which might be caused by exposure to Agent Orange be presumed to be related to military service, allowing veterans to receive disability benefits. In 2010, the VA added PD to the list of diseases with a presumptive service connection. In 2020, parkinsonism was added.

Exposure to Agent Orange does not have to be directly proven, but rather is assumed for those who served in specific locations and times. Serving anywhere in Vietnam between January 1962 and May 1975 makes a veteran eligible. There are other key locations and dates for which exposure to Agent Orange is assumed. Full details are available on the Veterans Health Administration website at <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/locations/index.asp>.

If you served in the specified locations on the specified dates, **you may be eligible for an Agent Orange Registry health exam**. You don't need to enroll in the VA's health care system to take part. Contact your local VA Environmental Health Coordinator about getting this health exam. You can find contact information on the Veterans Health Administration website at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/benefits/registry-exam.asp>.

The **Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act** of 2019 expanded the areas for which exposure to Agent Orange is assumed, to include the waters offshore of Vietnam.

Camp Lejeune is a Marine Corps training facility in North Carolina. From the 1950s through the 1980s, solvents were buried in base wells in the camp which seeped into the water supply. **The Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act** was passed in 2012 and stipulated that qualifying veterans and their families were eligible to receive all their healthcare from the VA if they served on active duty at Camp Lejeune for at least 30 days between August 1, 1953 and December 31, 1987, no matter what healthcare conditions they may have. There are 15 medical conditions presumed related to exposure. Care for these medical conditions is free of charge (including any co-pays). Neurobehavioral effects, which includes PD, is one of the 15 conditions.

In addition, PD is one of eight conditions that entitle veterans to disability compensation after Camp Lejeune exposure.

PD Care Through the Veterans Health Administration

Established in 2001, the VA maintains a group of six centers of excellence called Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (PADRECCs) that specialize in PD, as well as a nationwide network of Consortium Centers with expertise in PD. These centers provide diagnosis, treatment, multidisciplinary care, education, and support for people with PD at every stage of the disease.

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PADRECCs

The PADRECCs are PD centers of excellence designed to serve the estimated 80,000 veterans affected by PD through state-of-the-art clinical care, education, and research, as well as national outreach and advocacy. The PADRECCs are located in Philadelphia, PA; Richmond, VA; Houston, TX; West Los Angeles, CA; San Francisco, CA; and Portland, OR/Seattle, WA.

The PADRECCs are staffed by movement disorders specialists, neurosurgeons, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, researchers, educators, social workers, and other PD experts. The PADRECCs assist veterans in effectively managing PD and other movement disorders by offering VA pharmacy benefits, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, medical equipment, surgical services, and other valuable resources.

As their name implies, the PADRECCs are devoted to research and education, as well as clinical care. Physician-scientists at each center carry out studies to understand more about PD and its treatment. The PADRECCs are actively involved in educational activities to raise awareness about PD and related movement disorders. Educational initiatives for patients and their families include monthly support groups, disease-focused conferences, and the distribution of educational materials.

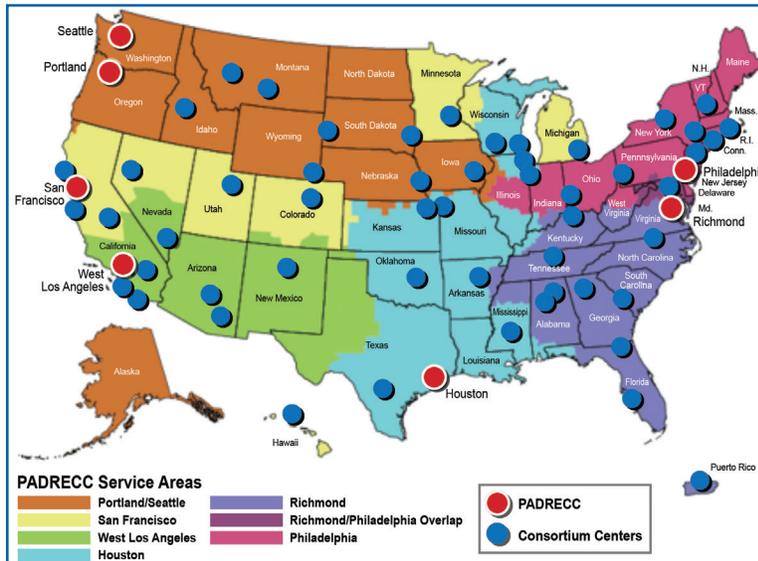
Consortium Centers

A Consortium Center is a VA clinic that offers specialized PD and movement disorder specialty care to veterans who cannot travel to a PADRECC. These centers are staffed by movement disorders specialists or clinicians with vast experience in the field of movement disorders. Consortium Centers work collaboratively with the PADRECCs to ensure the highest level of care for all veterans. Consortium Centers are distributed across the country, and there is a Consortium Center in almost every state.

How to Get Care

First, choose a PADRECC or Consortium Center at which you would like to receive care. Then, ask your VA primary care provider or neurologist to make a referral for you to that center. Finally, contact the PADRECC or Consortium Center to schedule an appointment. Be sure to allow at least 72 hours after your referring physician has sent the referral request.

Call the PADRECC/Consortium Hotline at 1-800-949-1001 ext. 205769 if you need assistance with this process. More information is available at the PADRECC/Consortium website: <http://www.parkinsons.va.gov/index.asp>.



National Headquarters

American Parkinson Disease Association
PO Box 61420
Staten Island, NY 10306

Telephone: 800-223-2732

Website: www.apdaparkinson.org

Email: apda@apdaparkinson.org

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