

Health Care Provider Guide to the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry

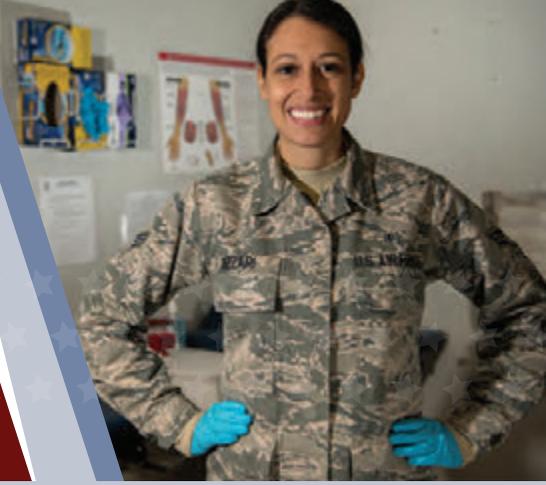


Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense
Photo by Airman 1st Class Randall Burlingame

Be Prepared to Treat Service Members Exposed to Airborne Hazards, Such as Open Burn Pit Smoke

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) developed the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry to enable service members and veterans to document their exposure to airborne hazards while serving overseas and to facilitate a discussion about their exposure with their provider. Review this guide to learn how you, as a health care provider, can support service members participating in the registry.

What Are the Health Concerns?

Service members who have been exposed to airborne hazards, such as open burn pit smoke, while serving may be at risk for short- and long-term health issues. After deployment to locations with open burn pits and other pollution sources, service members have returned with a range of mild to serious respiratory illnesses. At this time, there are no biomarkers specific to the environmental exposure-related health concerns of service members who deployed to eligible theaters of operations.

Conducting the Medical Exam

If the service member is receiving the medical exam after signing up for the registry online, they are encouraged to bring a printed copy of their completed questionnaire. Providers can also access a copy today through the Defense Occupational and Environmental Health Readiness System, and eventually through the Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record.

Providers should start by reviewing the service member's questionnaire and discussing their medical history with an emphasis on occupational/environmental exposures. Providers should assess the intensity and specific focus of concern of the individual, bearing in mind that patients seeking medical attention may have a variety of symptoms and exposure concerns.

The provider should discuss and document the service member's exposures in as much detail as possible. Questions to ask include, but are not limited to:

- What type of pollution were you exposed to during deployment (e.g., off-base pollution such as factories, cars, burning trash, or dust; or on-base pollution such as burning fuel or burn pits)?
- How many hours per day were you exposed?
- How many days, months, or years were you exposed?
- What air pollution have you been exposed to outside of deployment?

Providers should rely on their own evidence-based knowledge, expertise, and skills to guide a patient-centered evaluation and treat their symptoms according to clinical best practices. If clinically indicated, providers may:

- Perform a physical exam, with focus and extent determined by symptoms and/or health concerns
- Order diagnostics based on clinical signs/symptoms
- Refer the service member to specialists (e.g., occupational medicine or pulmonology) for further evaluation

Upon completing the exam, providers should document the encounter in the electronic health record; no additional forms are required. Providers should record the following diagnostic codes:

- In AHLTA, ICD-10 codes Z91.82 (personal history of military deployment) and X08.8 (exposure to other specified, smoke, fire)
- In MHS GENESIS, SNOMED-CT codes 3042585015 (history of military deployment) and 165638013 (exposure to environmental pollution, occupational)
- Plus any additional applicable diagnostic or symptom codes



How Does the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry Work?

Service members who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations on or after August 2, 1990, or in Afghanistan or Djibouti on or after September 11, 2001, are eligible for the registry. These regions include the following countries, bodies of water, and the airspace above these locations: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates; and waters of the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Red Sea.

STEP 1

Eligible service members first complete an online voluntary health questionnaire; their information is maintained in a secure database and may be used in future research studies.

STEP 2

Upon completion of the questionnaire, service members receive instructions via email and direct mail to contact their Department of Defense (DoD) military treatment facility for an optional in-person medical evaluation (Reserve component members will request their exams through VA). Service members are not required to complete the registry questionnaire to receive an exam.

Research on the Health Effects of Burn Pit Exposures is Limited

At this time, there is conflicting and insufficient research to show that long-term health problems have resulted from burn pit exposure. Some research shows higher rates of self-reported pulmonary symptoms, asthma, and unexpected conditions (e.g., eosinophilic pneumonia and constrictive bronchiolitis) among service members who deployed to eligible theaters of operations. Other research reports no elevation in disease or symptom reporting.

It is unclear what problems deployed individuals may develop and how widespread these problems are. VA and DoD, as well as external organizations, are continuing to research the short- and long-term health effects of airborne hazards.



Photo courtesy of the Defense Department
U.S. Army Reserve photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Jacob Sippel

Want to Learn More?

Log in to Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) at <https://jkodirect.jten.mil> to search for and complete the training course titled [DHA-US035 Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry Review](#). This course offers Continuing Medical Education units and includes a downloadable Clinical Toolbox.

For more general information on the registry, visit Health.mil/AHBurnPitRegistry or call VA's registry help desk at 1-877-470-5947.

