**Headline:** A National Asbestos-Exposure Registry of Veterans Could Combat Misdiagnosis in Mesothelioma Cases Nationwide

**Teaser:** Many U.S. veterans are suffering from asbestos-related illnesses due to past military exposure, highlighting the urgent need for a national asbestos-exposure registry to improve early detection, diagnosis, and access to VA benefits.

By Jonathan Sharp

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**[Article Body:]**

In [1922, the U.S. Navy](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2604477/) identified the [naturally occurring asbestos mineral](https://www.epa.gov/asbestos/learn-about-asbestos) as the most efficient and cost-effective insulation, gaskets, and shipbuilding material. During World War II, asbestos was critical to the U.S. military, especially the Navy and the Air Force. Shipping and shipbuilding were essential, and parts of military aircraft and incendiary bombs also contained asbestos.

Even as demand exceeded supply, in 1942, a presidential order banned the use of asbestos for non-military purposes until 1945. The application of asbestos-based material by the military and [most U.S. industries](https://mesothelioma.net/asbestos-product-companies/) continued to increase until the 1970s, when its [carcinogenic nature came to light](https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/substances/asbestos). The use of asbestos started to be regulated but was not banned.

The [extensive application of asbestos by the U.S. armed forces](https://www.mesotheliomahub.com/veterans/asbestos-in-the-military/) led to asbestos-caused conditions, such as mesothelioma, asbestosis, and lung cancer, among veterans who were exposed to asbestos dust during their service years. As asbestos-related malignant illnesses can take between 20 and 50 years to start showing symptoms, [the number of asbestos-caused deaths](https://www.asbestosnation.org/facts/asbestos-kills-12000-15000-people-per-year-in-the-u-s/) in the U.S. has been increasing in the past decades, and veterans are [disproportionately affected](https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/education/factsheets/asbestos-exposure.pdf). This is well illustrated by medical reports, which show that [about one-third of mesothelioma patients are veterans](https://news.va.gov/48765/va-accredited-claims-agent-discusses-mesothelioma-claims-world-class-va-care/).

[Mesothelioma is a deadly and aggressive cancer](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mesothelioma/symptoms-causes/syc-20375022) that is exclusively caused by asbestos exposure. Timely and appropriate diagnoses are the only option to find suitable treatment, alleviate symptoms, and prolong life expectancy when it comes to conditions caused by asbestos contamination. Unfortunately, the misdiagnosis of asbestos illnesses, especially [mesothelioma](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/malignant-mesothelioma/treating/by-extent.html), is far too common in the U.S. According to a medical study, about [14 to 50 percent](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8192079/) of mesothelioma diagnoses are incorrect.

The problem could be alleviated by having a national database enlisting military members with known and suspected asbestos exposure during their service years. Such a database would be an excellent tool for veterans' referrals to regular and specialized medical check-ups. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) need to consider setting up such a registry.

**Early Detection Is Crucial**

Mesothelioma and asbestosis are exclusively caused by asbestos exposure when people inhale airborne asbestos fibers. The microscopic mineral particles attack the lungs and the membranes around them in the first place, causing permanent damage and, eventually, cancer. While [asbestosis is a type of pulmonary fibrosis](https://www.lung.org/lung-health-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/asbestosis/learn-about-asbestosis), the scarring of lung tissues, [mesothelioma is a cancer](https://www.lung.org/lung-health-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/mesothelioma) that develops in the membrane around the lungs, abdomen, heart, or reproductive organs. Mesothelioma poses a significant challenge to the medical community.

It is hard to diagnose because its initial symptoms resemble more [common lung](https://www.mesotheliomahub.com/blog/5-diseases-mistaken-for-mesothelioma/) diseases. Moreover, it progresses rapidly after the first symptoms appear, which happen at a later stage of the cancer. Medical studies show that exposure to [all types of asbestos increases the risk of lung cancer](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/chemicals/asbestos.html), the second most common cancer in the U.S. Similar to mesothelioma, its symptoms do not appear before the cancer is already at an advanced stage. However, if it is detected early, it can be treated successfully.

The VA urges veterans to get tested for asbestos-related diseases, especially mesothelioma. However, a more systematic approach is needed because many veterans might not even be aware that their health is deteriorating due to exposure, which happened decades ago. Based on a [national asbestos-exposure registry](https://www.epa.gov/asbestos), veterans could be regularly reminded and called for specialized health check-ups, such as chest X-rays, CT scans, and pulmonary function (breathing) tests to reveal any damage caused by inhaled asbestos particles.

The [number of U.S. veterans has been declining](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/11/08/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/) and continues to do so. For example, in 1980, about 18 percent of the adult population were veterans, but by 2022, their proportion was only 6 percent. The decline in the number of veterans is primarily due to the overall veteran population aging, and many passing away. Illnesses, such as respiratory conditions and cancers, contribute to this process.

**Asbestos Takes Many Veteran Lives in All U.S. States**

While the number of asbestos-caused deaths has been increasing nationwide, some states are affected more than others. California is among the top three states with the largest veteran population in the U.S., with [over 1.48 million](https://www.data.va.gov/stories/s/NCVAS-State-Summary-California-FY2023/js9q-3wam/) veterans in 2023. California also has the most military installations in the country, with the [Navy having a strong presence](https://militarycouncil.ca.gov/s_californiamilitarybases/) in the coastal state.

Considering the military’s decades-long extensive use of toxic asbestos, it is not surprising that [California had 27,080 asbestos-caused deaths](https://www.asbestosnation.org/facts/asbestos-deaths/ca/) between 1999 and 2017, which is the most in the country. Many of these people whose lives were taken by asbestos-related illnesses were veterans.

California [used to mine and produce](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/tp61-c5.pdf) large amounts of asbestos, which was then used at its military bases. For instance, the former [Mare Island Naval Shipyard](https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/organization-and-administration/historic-bases/mare-island.html), located northeast of San Francisco, was the first Navy base on the West Coast. During WWII, it was one of the busiest naval shipyards in the world. Over 500 naval vessels were constructed, and thousands were overhauled at the Mare Island yard while it operated. Los Angeles County had the most asbestos-related deaths between 1999 and 2017 (around 4,979 victims). The County was home to [Long Beach Naval Shipyard](https://www.bracpmo.navy.mil/BRAC-Bases/California/Former-Long-Beach-Naval-Complex/) (1943-1997), an important site for maintaining U.S. Navy surface ships.

As of 2023, Texas had the highest veteran population in the country, with [more than 1.5 million](https://www.data.va.gov/stories/s/NCVAS-State-Summary-Texas-FY2023/ud6n-i3kg/). Between 1999 and 2017, Texas was also among the top three states with the most asbestos-related deaths, with [15,348 individuals](https://www.asbestosnation.org/facts/asbestos-deaths/tx/). Currently, the state is home to 15 active [military installations](https://gov.texas.gov/organization/military/installations), some of which are among the largest military facilities in the U.S. Approximately half of the [Navy’s strike pilots](https://www.repi.mil/Portals/44/Documents/State_Fact_Sheets/Texas_StateFacts.pdf) are trained in Texas at Naval Air Station Kingsville and Naval Air Station Corpus Christi.

**Veterans Should Know About Existing VA Support**

The military, as well as manufacturers, were aware of the hazards posed by asbestos years before its use started to be regulated and still exposed millions of veterans to its danger. Policymakers and some manufacturers have been trying to compensate for the harm caused by setting up [asbestos trust funds](https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-11-819.pdf) and [VA disability benefits and health care](https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/asbestos/) for veterans diagnosed with asbestos-linked conditions.

The disability compensation application process with the VA has been more straightforward since 2022 when Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson's Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act ([PACT Act](https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/#am-i-eligible-for-va-health-ca)) was passed. Asbestos and asbestos illnesses have been added to the list of presumptive conditions, and more than 1.4 million veterans have been approved for benefits nationwide thanks to the Act.

Having a national asbestos-exposure registry to rely on would significantly improve not only the diagnostic outcomes, but also more veterans could receive the well-earned benefits. Having a disability, especially at an older age, is an enormous burden, not only mentally and physically, but financially, too. Veterans should claim what is rightfully theirs and offered by the VA and the trust funds. Our veterans who sacrificed so much for our country deserve all the effort and support they can get.