

DEFENSE HEALTH RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Relevance to National Security and Military Families

ALS IN THE MILITARY

Unexpected Consequences of Military Services

More than seventy years ago, baseball legend Lou Gehrig gave his name to a mysterious and rare disease called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). He stood on the field at Yankee Stadium on July 4, 1939 and delivered one of the most memorable speeches in American history, announcing to the world that “today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth.” Lou Gehrig was an American hero.

Today, we know that besides being a hero, Gehrig had something else in common with the men and women who have served and are serving in the armed forces of our country - his disease; ALS.

The ALS Association has developed a report, “ALS in the Military: Unexpected Consequences of Military Service,” that details the numerous studies that have been conducted which have found that:

Military veterans, regardless of the branch of service, regardless of the era in which they served, and regardless of whether they served during a time of peace or a time of war, are at a greater risk of dying from ALS than if they had not served in the military.

The full report is available on The ALS Association’s website, www.alsa.org/Military and includes reviews of numerous studies, reports, and other evidence demonstrating the link between ALS and military service:

- **Harvard University:** Studies conducted in 2005 and 2009 by researchers at Harvard University and funded by the Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health concluded that all military veterans, regardless of branch or era of service are nearly twice as likely to develop ALS.
- **Presumption of Service Connection:** In 2008, the VA implemented regulations to establish a presumption of service connection for ALS. Under the regulation, the VA presumes that ALS in military veterans was incurred or aggravated by a veteran’s service in the military. As a result, veterans with ALS and their survivors are eligible for “service connected” benefits.



- **Gulf War Studies:** Studies conducted by the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs and University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center found that those who served in the 1991 Persian Gulf War are approximately twice as likely to develop ALS as those who did not serve in the war.
- **Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans Illnesses:** Congressionally established advisory committee reported that “Gulf War veterans exhibit evidence of neurological problems, including a significant excess in the rate of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig’s disease.” The 2008 report stated that “The most serious condition reported to affect Gulf War veterans at a higher than expected rate is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.”
- **Institute of Medicine:** 2006 publication reviewed existing evidence and reported that “[T]he implication is that military service in general – not confined to exposures specific to the Gulf War – is related to the development of ALS. The findings, if validated in other studies, suggest that exposures during military services, even among those with no wartime service, might be responsible.”
- **VA ALS Registry/National ALS Registry:** The VA established a registry to identify cases of ALS in military veterans. From 2003 to 2007, the registry identified more than 2,100 veterans with ALS and has supplied data vital for ALS research. The National ALS Registry, created by Congress in 2008 at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also is collecting data on veterans with ALS and was launched in October 2010.



The ALS Association urges Congress to support our heroes in the military, including funding the research that will help us learn why ALS strikes military veterans and how the disease can be treated, prevented and ultimately cured. This is vital, for ALS is among the only specific diseases that occurs at a higher rate in all veterans, regardless of their era of service. Help us fight for our veterans, just as they fought for us.