

# Gulf War illness hits up to a third of vets

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WASHINGTON — Gulf War illness is a real medical condition that has affected at least 175,000 combat veterans of the 1991 Persian Gulf war, according to a report released Monday.

However, federal research into the causes behind the mysterious malady has "not been effective," and the report by the congressionally mandated panel suggested politics or financial concerns may have played a role.

"There is also a common perception that federal policymakers have not vigorously pursued key research in this area and that federal agencies have disincentives — whether political or fiscal — for providing definitive answers to Gulf War health questions," said the Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illness.

A quarter to a third of the 700,000 troops who served in the war suffer from Gulf War illness. Less than 10 percent have recovered or show improvement, the report says.

The report compared the foot-dragging and denials to the treatment of earlier troops who claimed they had been dangerously exposed to Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides in Vietnam and to radiation during World War II.

In both cases, the claims turned out to be true.

"Government has been very slow to accept what the research shows," said James Binns, the committee's chairman and a former top Defense Department official.

"These problems have for too long been denied or trivialized,"

said Binns, speaking at the committee meeting where the report was made public.

Committee members said troops were exposed to a "toxic soup" of chemicals. But they laid the blame for Gulf War illness primarily on two causes: pesticides sprayed on the troops during deployment and pyridostigmine bromide, an anti-nerve agent.

The small white pills hadn't been approved for nerve agent protection at the time, but the Food and Drug Administration gave the military a temporary waiver for their use to protect troops in case they were exposed to nerve gas.

The Veterans Affairs Department didn't respond to the committee's criticism but said VA Secretary James Peake has directed the agency "to review and respond to the committee's recommendations in the near future."

The report, six years in the making, should be a boon to Gulf War veterans who for years have been trying to persuade the VA to recognize their medical problems.

Often too ill to work, many have been unable to get medical disability payments from the VA because they couldn't prove their ailments were real and related to their military service.

Gulf War syndrome has become an umbrella for unexplained illnesses, including chronic headaches, dizziness, memory loss, fatigue, skin rashes, joint and muscle pain and respiratory problems, as well as more-serious neurological conditions and brain cancer.

The United States invaded Iraq in January 1991 in retaliation for its attack on Kuwait the previous August.