



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# CONDUCTING GULF WAR MEDICAL OPINIONS

Medical Disability Examination Program  
Veterans Benefits Administration  
April 2019



# Learning Objectives

1. Identify when a medical opinion should be offered.
  - Undiagnosed illness
  - Medical unexplained chronic multi-symptom illness
  - Chronicity
2. Identify when a medical opinion should not be offered.
3. Responding to a Gulf War exam request.



## **Gulf War General Medical**

**GULF WAR (from August 2, 1990 to 1991): Military Service in Southwest Asia August 2, 1990 to the present; Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm**

**OIF/OEF (Iraq and Afghanistan): Some conflicts in Iraq from August 2, 1990 to the present and in Afghanistan on or after September 19, 2001; Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (Afghanistan only included in some environmental exposures, otherwise excluded)**



## Gulf War Illness

Affecting Gulf War Veterans is a cluster of medically unexplained chronic symptoms.

VA refers to these illnesses as “Chronic Multi-symptom Illness” and “undiagnosed illnesses”, for this talk will use alternative of Gulf War illness.

- “Gulf War Syndrome” is less accurate when referring to medically unexplained symptoms reported by Gulf War Veterans
- Why? Because symptoms vary widely
- There is no formal ICD9/ICD10 code for this specifically

All refer to the same thing: a well-documented pattern of symptoms found at elevated rates (wide range but 1/3rd or so seen in some studies) in multiple population studies of 1990-91 Gulf War veterans.



# Challenges in Defining Gulf War Illness

At this time there is

- **No single recommended or validated case definition for GWI**
- **No diagnostic test for GWI**
- **No ICD-10 code for GWI**



## **NO Case Definition**

The Department of Veterans Affairs charged the National Academy of Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine) with establishing a consensus research case definition for GWI (2013)

The National Academy of Medicine released a report titled, “Chronic Multisymptom Illness in Gulf War Veterans: Case Definitions Reexamined” (2014)

Committee concluded they could not develop a new case definition because vital elements of a case definition (duration, onset, laboratory findings) were not available



## **Gulf War Exposures**

VA statutes and regulations provide for service connection for certain chronic disabilities and infectious diseases based on exposure to environmental hazards during service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations (August 2, 1990 to present), to include Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm:

- exposure to oil and gas fire fumes
- ingestion of pyridostigmine bromide tablets
- combined effect of multiple vaccines
- inhalation of ultra fine sand, dust and particulates
- exposure to burn pits
- Chemical and biological weapons, depleted uranium, CARC paint, and pesticides
- Infectious diseases, heat, noise and other occupational hazards



## A Supporting Medical Statement Based on Gulf War Service

A ***supporting medical statement*** based on Gulf War service should be offered when the Service Member/Veteran has a qualifying chronic disability that results from:

- An undiagnosed illness (medical opinion not needed)
- A diagnosable but medically unexplained chronic multi-symptom illness (MUCMI) (medical opinion not needed)
- A diagnosable chronic multi-symptom illness with a partially explained etiology (medical opinion needed)
- A disease with a clear and specific etiology and diagnosis. (medical opinion needed)





## Undiagnosed Illness

An undiagnosed illness is a type of chronic qualifying disability where qualifying signs and/or symptoms cannot be attributed to any known clinical diagnosis by history, physical examination, and laboratory tests. M21-1  
iv.ii.2.D.1.h



# Medically Unexplained Chronic Multi-Symptom Illness (MUCMI)

- MUCMI is a type of chronic qualifying disability in which there is a diagnosed illness that has **BOTH**
  1. an inconclusive pathophysiology, and
  2. an inconclusive etiology
- Has overlapping symptoms and signs, and features such as:
  - Fatigue and pain
  - Disability out of proportion to physical findings, **and**
  - Inconsistent demonstration of laboratory abnormalities



## **MUCMIs include but are not limited to:**

- chronic fatigue syndrome
- fibromyalgia, or
- functional gastrointestinal disorders (FGIDs), excluding structural gastrointestinal diseases.

M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.1.i



## Establishing Chronicity

To establish SC for a disability under 38 CFR 3.317, the claimed disability must be chronic, that is, it must have persisted for a period of six months.

Measure the six-month period of chronicity from the earliest date on which all pertinent evidence establishes that the signs or symptoms of the disability first manifested.



## Establishing Chronicity continued

If a disability is subject to intermittent episodes of improvement and worsening within a six-month period, consider the disability to be chronic. M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.1.o

Carefully review all evidence, not just the most recent evidence, prior to determining if a claimed disability is chronic. M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.1.o



## Potential Signs/Symptoms of MUCMI

13 categories of signs or symptoms that may be manifestations of an undiagnosed illness or an MUCMI include but are not limited to:

- joint pain
- muscle pain
- headache
- abnormal weight loss
- fatigue
- sleep disturbances
- menstrual disorders.
- cardiovascular signs or symptoms
- neurological signs or symptoms
- neuropsychological signs or symptoms
- gastrointestinal signs or symptoms
- skin signs and symptoms, and
- respiratory signs and symptoms (upper and lower)



## **Actions to Take Prior to Offering Opinion**

Prior to offering an opinion, the examiner should review the Veteran's records /examinations to determine if the reported symptoms are related to a diagnosed condition. For example, if there are complaints of chest pain, shortness of breath, and headaches, in conjunction with diagnosed conditions of coronary artery disease, asthma, and migraine headaches, the examiner should determine whether the symptoms are due to the diagnosed conditions.

An explanation should be provided if it is determined that the symptoms, in the presence of diagnosed conditions, are due to an *undiagnosed* illness or MUCMI.



## Medical Opinions

***Medical opinions*** should be offered WHEN

- the Service Member/Veteran has been diagnosed with a condition that is considered a **diagnosable chronic multi-symptom illnesses of partially explained etiology and pathophysiology**. Examples of these types of conditions are: diabetes mellitus and multiple sclerosis.
- the Service Member/Veteran has been diagnosed with a **disability with a clear and specific etiology**.

Please provide a medical opinion, with supporting rationale, as to whether it is “at least as likely as not” that the disability pattern or diagnosed disease is related to a specific exposure event experienced by the Veteran during service in Southwest Asia.

\*If applicable, medical opinions can be offered on a direct or presumptive basis.





## Providing a Medical Opinion

1. Examine and evaluate the Veteran who served in Southwest Asia for any chronic disability pattern.
2. Review the claims folder as part of the evaluation and state it was reviewed when providing your findings (i.e. The Veteran has claimed a disability pattern related to insert symptoms described by the Veteran).
3. Provide a medical statement explaining whether the Veteran's disability pattern is:
  - An undiagnosed illness, **or**
  - A diagnosable but medically unexplained chronic multi-symptom illness of unknown etiology, **or**
  - A diagnosable chronic multi-symptom illness with a partially explained etiology, **or**
  - A disease with a clear and specific etiology and diagnosis.



## Examination Completion

It is imperative that the Gulf War DBQ template and all diagnostic protocol are followed and completed in their entirety. M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.2.h.



# References

- 38 CFR 3.317
- M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.1.h
- M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.1.i
- M21-1 iv.ii.2.D.1.o
- M21-1 iv. ii.2.D.2.h.



Publications and  
Reports on Gulf War



Diagnosis and  
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Gulf War  
Research Studies



Infectious  
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GW Unexplained  
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