

This is a seventh newsletter in a series of ONCORG Community Conversations. They're focused on relationships between doctors and patients, and the complexity of treating cancer.

April 2026 – Late Edition: Recognizing how cancer affects our military veterans.



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Mr. Thomas is a military veteran who served 8 years in the USAF. He also spent 11 years in the automotive industry, 10 years in healthcare and 8 years with Apple Inc. supporting customer needs.

So he has a unique insight into what it takes to enhance the customer experience and obtain strong customer feedback, which is essential to a company's reputation. He also understands how to maximize performance from a team by encouraging collaboration.

In anticipation of Memorial Day, ONCORG is dedicating the next two articles to our veterans affected by cancer. This article will focus on Agent Orange and the next article will focus on Burn Pits.

What is Agent Orange?

Agent Orange was a plant-killing chemical (herbicide containing toxic dioxin) the United States military used during the Vietnam conflict from 1962 to 1971 to clear trees, plants and vegetation from U.S. bases and to remove foliage used for cover. During this time, the U.S. sprayed 11 million gallons of Agent Orange over 20 million acres in Vietnam.

Between 1962 and 1971 about 3 millions veterans were possibly exposed to this toxic herbicide. About 300,000 of these veterans died from this toxic herbicide exposure. We lost 58,000 soldiers in combat. Think about this peripheral enemy. Subsequently the medical community learned their exposure is linked to over 50 diseases and various birth defects in their children.

Veterans who served in Vietnam or on contaminated Fairchild C-123 Provider aircrafts are considered "presumptively" exposed, meaning they do not need to prove their disease was directly caused by the chemical. The C-123 aircraft was used to spread the agent orange.

Up to 4 million people in Vietnam were exposed, with as many as 3 million suffering health issues, according to the Vietnamese government.

The primary cause of cancer is believed to be **2,3,7,8-TCDD**, a toxic dioxin compound found in Agent Orange, classified as a known human carcinogen. Cleveland Clinic published this report about agent orange: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/24689-agent-orange-effects>

This report indicated exposure to the herbicide caused various cancer, diabetes, congenital (birth) disorders, and life-threatening health complications. Most disturbing [ND Department of Veterans Affairs \(.gov\)](#) there is evidence that over 500,000 children of veterans have been born with birth defects potentially related to exposure.

Symptoms of Agent Orange:

Although agent orange is linked to cancer, there are many other symptoms to take note of, such as: unusual fatigue, prone to frequent infections, significant acne, edema of the feet and legs, and shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.

Conditions caused by Agent Orange:

There are over 14 diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure, the most common are: Amyloidosis, birth defects (previously noted), bladder cancer, Type 2 diabetes, Hodgkin and non-Hodgkin lymphoma, multiple myeloma, ischemic heart disease, Parkinson, prostate cancer, lung cancer, respiratory cancer, melanoma, pancreatic cancer, brain cancers and peripheral neuropathy.

Reference: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/24689-agent-orange-effects>

VA Cancer statistics, not specifically linked to Agent Orange:

The VA treats over 450,000 veterans for cancer annually, with about 43,000 to 55,000 new diagnoses each year. Data indicates a significant rise in certain cancers over the past two decades, including a 70% increase in blood, kidney, and bladder cancers. Veterans are frequently diagnosed with prostate, lung, colorectal, and skin cancers.

Now, new reports indicate military women are up to 40% more likely to develop breast cancer than civilians.

Organizations like American Legion, DAV and VFW have fought relentlessly for veterans rights and the VA makes every effort to support our veterans in need. Veterans can visit the [VA's dedicated cancer page](#).

As a commander in the American Legion, we have a saying. 'Some gave all, and all gave some.' And now we've come to learn our veterans are continuing to give because they were afflicted by agent orange and other chemical exposures. Eventually they will give 'all.' More than 50% of our post legionnaires are Vietnam veterans.

Rodney Thomas
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