

Take the test.

That's what veterans advocate Link Savoie has been saying for years to Vietnam veterans, like himself. For years he spoke to them about getting tested for possible damage caused by use of the defoliant Agent Orange.

If you don't get tested, Savoie reasoned, you risk not knowing whether you could have symptoms of any one of 11 diseases and ailments linked to Agent Orange. And, the earlier a disease is detected, the better chances are of dealing with it.

"When you get out of the service, many are 24, 25 or 26, and you feel fine," said Savoie, who served in the Army for 22 years including tours of duty in Korea and Vietnam. "Then when they become of age, they start to notice that this hurts, and that hurts.

"They start getting things like colon cancer and other maladies in their system. Then, they start dying on us."

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, approximately 20 million gallons of herbicides were used in Vietnam between 1962 and 1971 to remove unwanted plant life and leaves which otherwise provided cover for enemy forces during the Vietnam War.

Shortly following their military service in Vietnam, some veterans reported a variety of health problems and concerns which some of them attributed to exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides.

VA offers compensation and benefits for Vietnam veterans suffering from the following 11 diseases: chloracne; Hodgkin's disease; non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; multiple myeloma; porphyria cutanea tarda; respiratory cancers (lung, bronchus, larynx and trachea); soft-tissue sarcoma; acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy; prostate cancer; diabetes mellitus (Type 2 diabetes); and chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

Testing is offered at VA hospitals in both Alexandria and Shreveport, and it takes roughly a half a day to complete blood work, EKG and X-rays and announce results.

"The Agent Orange Exam is a way for a veteran to get a good history and physical," said Dr. Ruth Angel, who coordinates the Agent Orange Registry Examination process for the Alexandria VA Medical Center. "It is a general check-up that is focused on looking to see if the veteran has any of the presumptive Agent Orange conditions.

"Recently ALS and diabetes were added as presumptive Agent Orange conditions. If a veteran previously had an Agent Orange Exam before these conditions were added and they carry either of the diagnoses, they do not have to have another Agent Orange Exam now. They need to take the documentation from their doctor showing they have on the presumptive Agent Orange diagnoses, along with documentation that they were in Vietnam, to their local parish service officer so that they can begin the Compensation and Pension claim process."

"My motivation is to have every Vietnam veteran in Louisiana take the test, especially those in south Louisiana," said Savoie.

It was Savoie's connections as an All-American State Commander of the VFW that allowed him to reach hundreds of veterans in the cause, and he helped transport many to testing once he convinced them of the need.

Many affected veterans asked the next logical question - Could my offspring be affected? That simple question, and the answer - yes - helped Savoie convince more veterans to undergo the tests.

Savoie finally heeded his own advice and was hit with sobering news.

"One day," he said, "I was taking my physical and my white blood cell count exceeded the red cells. My doctor said now was the time to get tested, and to send those results to an oncologist. In November of 2007, I was told I had CLL (chronic lymphocytic leukemia).

"It's not bad. My count is now around 15,000, and the doctors said if I can maintain that, they'll work with me. We can manage it."

CLL was the last of 11 diseases to be included in the category of ailments caused by Agent Orange. It has only been in the last two years that the list had 11 and not 10 diseases. Vigorous pursuit of the issue by Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) groups finally prevailed.

Savoie himself is now on 100 percent, non-revocable disability because of CLL. But the campaign remains vigorous.

"How did someone die of alleged Agent Orange damage if they'd never been tested?" Savoie asked. "We knew these guys were dying for a reason."

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