



## Veterans Affairs

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Director

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# POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

## What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is a psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life threatening events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults. People who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel detached or estranged, and these symptoms can be severe enough and last long enough to significantly impair the person's daily life.

PTSD is marked by clear biological changes as well as psychological symptoms. PTSD is complicated by the fact that it frequently occurs in conjunction with related disorders such as depression, substance abuse, problems of memory and cognition, and other problems of physical and mental health. The disorder is also associated with impairment of the person's ability to function in social or family life, including occupational instability, marital problems and divorces, family discord, and difficulties in parenting.

## Understanding PTSD

Careful research and documentation of PTSD began in earnest after the Vietnam War. The National Vietnam Veterans Study estimated in 1988 that the prevalence of PTSD in that group was 15.2% at that time, and that 30% had experienced the disorder at some point since returning from Vietnam.

PTSD has subsequently been observed in all veteran populations that have been studied, including World War II, Korean conflict, Vietnam, Desert Storm, OEF/OIF and in United Nations peacekeeping forces deployed to other war zones around the world.

## How does PTSD develop?

Most people who are exposed to a traumatic, stressful event experience some of the symptoms of PTSD in the days and weeks following exposure. Available data suggest that about 8% of men and 20% of women go on to develop PTSD, and roughly 30% of these individuals develop a chronic form that persists throughout their lifetimes.

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## **How Common is PTSD?**

An estimated 7.8% of Americans will experience PTSD at some point in their lives, with women twice as likely as men to have PTSD. About 3.6 percent of U.S. adults ages 18 to 54 have PTSD during the course of a given year. This represents a small proportion of those who have experienced a traumatic event at some point in their lives with 60.7% of men and 51.2% of women reporting that they have experienced a traumatic event. The traumatic events most often associated with PTSD are for men: rape, combat exposure, childhood neglect, and childhood physical abuse. For women: rape, sexual molestation, physical attack, being threatened with a weapon, and childhood physical abuse.

About 30 percent of the men and women who have spent time in war zones develop chronic PTSD. An additional 20 to 25 percent have experienced some PTSD symptoms at some point in their lives.

## **Who is Most Likely to Develop PTSD?**

- Those who experience greater stressor magnitude and intensity, unpredictability, uncontrollability, sexual (as opposed to nonsexual) victimization, real or perceived responsibility, and betrayal.
- Those with prior vulnerability factors such as genetics, early age of onset and longer-lasting childhood trauma, lack of functional social support, and concurrent stressful life events.
- Those who report greater perceived threat or danger, suffering or being upset, terror, and horror or fear.
- Those with a social environment which produces shame, guilt, stigmatization, or self-hatred.

## **What are the effects of PTSD?**

PTSD is associated with a number of distinctive changes in the brain and in behavior. PTSD can cause hyper arousal of the sympathetic nervous system, increased sensitivity of the startle reflex, and sleep abnormalities.

PTSD also increases the likelihood of co-occurring psychiatric disorders. The co-occurring disorders most prevalent for men with PTSD were alcohol abuse, depression, and drug abuse. Among women they were depression disorder, simple phobia, social phobia and alcohol abuse.

PTSD also has a significant impact on family and other interpersonal relationships, employment, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain, or discomfort in other parts of the body are common in people with PTSD. Often, medical doctors treat the symptoms without being aware that they stem from PTSD.

## **What is the Course of PTSD?**

Most people who are exposed to a traumatic stressor experience some of the symptoms of PTSD in following days and weeks. Among individuals who go on to develop PTSD, roughly 30 percent develop a chronic form that persists throughout an individual's lifetime. Chronic PTSD usually has periods of increased and decreased symptoms, although for some, symptoms may remain at a severe level. Some veterans who report a lifetime of only mild symptoms, experience increased symptoms following retirement, decrease in their health or that of their spouse, or exposure to reminders of their military service (such as reunions or media coverage of war).

## **Service Connection, VA Criteria**

Service connection for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) requires a current diagnosis and a VA medical opinion that the claimed stressor event was sufficient to cause PTSD. The stressor event must involve the fear of hostile military or terrorist activity and be consistent with the circumstances, dates, places, and types of duties in the veteran's service records. All claimants are required to submit a stressor statement with their claim.

If a veteran has been awarded one of the following medals, VA will concede that a qualifying stressor event occurred:

- Air Force Cross Distinguished Service Cross
- Air Medal with "V" Device
- Army Commendation Medal with 'V' Device
- Bronze Star Medal with "V" Device
- Combat Action Ribbon
- Combat Infantryman Badge
- Distinguished Flying Cross
- Device Joint Service Commendation Medal with 'V' Device
- Medal of Honor
- Navy Commendation Medal with "V" Device
- Navy Cross
- Purple Heart
- Combat Medical Badge
- Silver Star

***Important:*** The lay testimony of a combat Veteran alone may establish an in-service stressor for the purposes of establishing service connection for PTSD.

### **Veterans Affairs Office Locations:**

- 175 W. Fifth Street, Second Floor, San Bernardino, CA 92415-0470 (909) 387-5516
- 15900 Smoke Tree Street, Hesperia, CA 92345 (760) 995-8010
- 8575 Haven Ave., Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91730 (909-948-6470
- **Or call Toll Free from anywhere in San Bernardino County : 1-866-4SBVets (1-866-472-8387)**