

# How Can I Receive VA Disability Benefits After Burn Pit Exposure?

To receive VA disability benefits for a condition you believe to be caused by burn pit exposure, you must prove that your disability was caused by your exposure.

## When and Where Were Burn Pits Used?

You may have been exposed to burn pits while serving in any of the following military operations since September 11, 2001:

- Operation Iraqi Freedom
- Operation Enduring Freedom
- Operation New Dawn

Researchers continue to amass evidence demonstrating a link between burn pit exposure and a number of severe illnesses, including cancers and respiratory conditions. And while VA has been slow to acknowledge the connection, other government officials have taken notice. The latest was a Labor Department judge who in February 2018 issued a decision ruling that exposure to burn pits caused a military contractor's lung disease.

Although this ruling does not have bearing on veterans' claims for VA disability compensation, it represents a possible shift in acknowledging the health impacts of burn pit exposure for those exposed.

## What are Burn Pits and How Does Exposure Lead to Illness?

For many years, the military used burn pits in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Djibouti to dispose of waste on military bases. Some items burned in the pits included metal, aluminum, rubber, chemicals, and even human waste. They were set on fire in open-air pits and burned.

These open-air burn pits released toxins, carcinogens, smoke, and ash into the air, which then reached the skin, noses, and lungs of those in the vicinity. Following exposure, tens of thousands of veterans have reported lung diseases and other ailments as a result of their exposure.

## What Is the Burn Pit Registry?

Recognizing the growing issue with burn pit exposure and subsequent issues, VA established the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. The Registry, which you can access on VA's website, offers a starting point for building your VA disability claim. You can add your name to the registry and begin creating a record that you were exposed and later became ill.

That said, participation in the Burn Pit Registry and filing a VA disability compensation claim are two separate things, and one does not influence the other in any way. Adding your name to the Burn Pit Registry does not initiate a disability claim, nor does it hold your place in the claim queue (wait times for VA disability claims can be long). The Registry was established by Congress for VA to track service members who were exposed and use the data to identify trends and draw conclusions regarding burn pits' impacts on service members' health.

## **Getting Disability for Burn Pit Exposure**

To receive disability benefits for a medical condition caused by exposure to a military burn pit, you have to submit an application to VA. The application, along with supporting evidence, must show that you have a disabling condition and that a specific event in your military service—in this case, exposure to a burn pit—caused it.

### **Demonstrating That You Have a Disabling Medical Condition**

The list of medical conditions potentially connected to burn pit exposure is long and includes the following (this list is not exhaustive):

- Asthma
- Breathing problems
- Cancer (in particular, brain, lung, and skin, as well as leukemia and lymphoma)
- Chronic bronchitis
- Constrictive bronchiolitis
- Headaches
- Heart conditions
- Pulmonary distress
- Skin lesions
- Sleep apnea
- Ulcers
- Unexplained weight loss
- Vomiting

To receive a grant of benefits from these claims can be particularly difficult because VA decides them on a case-by-case basis.

### **Showing That Your Condition Is Service-Connected**

The key to receiving VA disability benefits for a condition due to burn pit exposure is connecting your condition to a specific event in your military service. VA must know exposure to a military burn pit caused your illness. Medical evidence and expert medical testimony can make the connection clear.