

A Silent Enemy

**2022**

How Arthritis Is Threatening the U.S. Military

One of every three United States military veterans lives with arthritis, a serious, chronic and complex disease that affects one in four Americans in the general population. Arthritis carries with it enormous physical, financial and societal costs, but for active duty military and veterans, the costs are multiplied.

Today, arthritis is the top cause of disability among veterans and one of the major reasons that active duty military are discharged from service. Research supporting better prevention strategies, interventions and treatments is crucial to reducing the number of active duty military and veterans suffering from arthritis.

Why Active Duty Military Are More Prone to Arthritis

As early as basic training, active duty military are carrying 60-100+ lb. packs that can injure and weaken their joints, which can lead to arthritis. Combat injuries increase the risk for arthritis: For example, shock waves from bomb blasts can cause early joint damage, which in turn may lead to early onset arthritis. Post-traumatic osteoarthritis (PTOA) can be severely disabling and debilitating. Active duty military are often injured at a young age, which translates to more years of joint-related symptoms, activity limitations and risks associated with medical procedures.

What Arthritis Does to Veterans and Soldiers

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the second most common reason active duty military are discharged from the U.S. Army. In a 10-year review of

arthritis among active duty military found OA rates to be 26 percent higher in the under-20 age group, compared with the same age group in the general population. Data from the Army's Physical Evaluation Board revealed that arthritis was the most common unfitting condition, with 94.4 percent of cases attributed to combat injury. Though these statistics are specific to Army, we believe they are similar across all branches. Traumatic anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries occur frequently among service members – and can lead to the development of arthritis and possible joint reconstruction within 20 years. In fact, over 3,000 ACL reconstructions are performed every year in U.S. military hospitals. Musculoskeletal injuries are pervasive, and represent 68 percent of all limited-duty orders, even in non-combat units. Veterans over age 40 were twice as likely to develop arthritis after

returning to civilian life, and many will need costly lifelong care for this progressively degenerative condition. Active duty military are often diagnosed with the condition within two years of being injured, versus civilian injuries where onset of arthritis usually occurs after 10 years.

What the Arthritis Foundation is Doing

The Arthritis Foundation is currently addressing the impact arthritis has on the active duty and veteran population through various programs including:

- A formal partnership with the VA to expand the support resources for veterans with arthritis.
- The Military and Veterans Connect Group, an online group serving active duty and retired military/veterans in the arthritis community across the country. Connect groups offer connections, education, and empowerment.
- Funding research studies at multiple institutions to better understand PTOA and OA, improve treatment, and ultimately find a cure.

How Further Arthritis Research Can Help

Research can help identify ways to lessen joint injury during military training; it's important to study people after a joint injury rather than just looking at people who have already been diagnosed with osteoarthritis. Research on the genetics and epigenetics of rheumatoid arthritis can help us better understand what causes RA, which can lead to more effective treatments with fewer side effects.

Why Department of Defense (DoD)-Funded Arthritis Research Is Key

There is a growing burden of arthritis among active duty military and veteran populations. Arthritis negatively affects the ability of active

duty members to perform their duties, and it limits the quality of life for veterans. Arthritis is responsible for rising DoD and VA health care costs because of its impact on disease management, joint pain, loss of function and joint replacement surgery. Currently, arthritis and clinical care research – on both active duty military and veteran populations – is very limited.

Arthritis research has been funded at the DoD since Fiscal Year 2010 in the Peer Reviewed Medical Research Program (PRMRP) within the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program (CDMRP). However, arthritis topics compete against dozens of other medical topics authorized in the PRMRP, so funding is not guaranteed.

Recommendation

Congress should authorize the creation of a stand-alone arthritis program within the DoD's Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program – funded at \$20 million – to ensure more dedicated research funding to meet the growing needs of active duty military and veterans. Arthritis research that helps our military and veteran populations will benefit everyone with arthritis, a debilitating disease that attacks one in four Americans in the general population. Each year we build more support and are confident we can accomplish this goal in the 118th Congress.



arthritis.org/advocate

