

Agent Orange: What We Learned From an Uncontrolled Experiment on American Soldiers and the People of Southeast Asia

The U.S. military sprayed over 19 million gallons of Agent Orange on Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the Vietnam War, exposing many people. From 1962 to 1971, the U.S. military sprayed Agent Orange and other chemicals on the forests of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. These chemicals were used as an herbicide - a plant-killer - to remove the jungle canopy of foliage and to destroy crops that could benefit the armies the U.S. was fighting. American soldiers serving in Southeast Asia and the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were exposed to these chemicals when they were sprayed.



Doctors originally told us the side effects of Agent Orange exposure would be limited. Many exposed people got a skin rash called chloracne. At that time, military doctors told their patients that this type of acne would be the only problem they would have from their Agent Orange exposure. But they were terribly wrong.

We now know that Agent Orange is linked to cancers, birth defects, and other diseases. Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange can be compensated for one kind of leukemia, two kinds of lymphoma (Hodgkin's Disease, non Hodgkin's lymphoma), other kinds of cancer, as well as diabetes, a type of heart disease, and Parkinson's Disease. The VA also compensates when the child of a Vietnam veteran is born with a birth defect called spina bifida that results in the incomplete closing of the spine.

No other chemical has received such comprehensive and consistent review as Agent Orange. Why did we learn so much about Agent Orange? As Vietnam Veterans fell ill and their children were born with birth defects, veterans, their families, and their doctors organized to draw attention to the health problems they believed were connected to their military service. As a result, Congress passed the Agent Orange Act of 1991. The legislation mandated that every two years the National Institute of Medicine evaluate the scientific and medical information on the health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam. The findings are reported to the Veterans Administration (VA) so compensation and treatment can be provided.



Why do we think that all these diseases have anything to do with chemicals? Because the story of Agent Orange shows how one chemical we were told was safe can cause many diseases many years after exposure, including in children born decades later.