



Keep Esophageal Cancer in the Department of Defense Peer-Reviewed Cancer Research Program (PRCRP)

Esophageal Cancer is one of the Deadliest Cancers affecting Americans & our Military

Esophageal cancer is the seventh leading cause of cancer-related death among American men. Four out of five patients - including many veterans – will die within five years of receiving an esophageal cancer diagnosis. It is one of America’s deadliest cancers, largely because little effective treatment, scarce early detection and no screening guidelines exist for this disease.ⁱ

In 2012, Congress recognized the importance of addressing deadliest cancers, including esophageal cancer, by enacting the Recalcitrant Cancer Research Act, which defines deadliest cancers as those with a five-year survival rate below 50 percent. In the Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012, Congress also recognized the risk of developing esophageal cancer among veterans who served at the U.S. Marine Corps Base in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina from the 1950s to 1987 due to potential exposure to drinking water contaminated with industrial solvents, benzene, and other chemicals.ⁱⁱ

In addition, veterans and members of the military are more likely to be at higher risk for esophageal cancer than the general population. Men are four times more likely to develop esophageal cancer than women. Men over the age of 55 with a history of gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD), tobacco use, alcohol use or obesity are at greatest risk. Each of these risk factors are higher among American veterans when compared to the general population.ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that studies also show that the incidence of esophageal adenocarcinoma, the most prevalent form of esophageal cancer in the U.S., has doubled among patients under the age of 50 for the last several decades, making this disease a risk for the warfighters and their families as well. Even more important, patients with early-onset esophageal adenocarcinoma typically present with late-stage disease when the survival rate is the lowest.^{iv}

Esophageal Cancer is a Disability for Which Service Connection is Presumed

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has established a presumption that esophageal cancer in veterans is the result of military service for those who served at Camp Lejeune and those exposed to radiation.^v

Further, given the burden that esophageal cancer has and is projected to have on the military and veteran population and the fact that the VA and Congress have already recognized links between military service and esophageal cancer, it meets the criteria of PRCRP that the diseases that are included be directly relevant to military service members and their families.

Keeping Esophageal Cancer in the DoD’s PRCRP is Critical for Veterans, Warfighters and their Families and for all Americans

Esophageal cancer has been included as a disease eligible for funding in the PRCRP since FY 2020. While the grant funding process is underway for FY 2021, \$4.36 million was awarded for esophageal cancer research in the first year. ECAN urges the continued inclusion of this devastating disease in this important program to not only ensure that we can leverage this initial

investment, but to speed the development of the tools and treatments that are so desperately needed by esophageal cancer patients. Because the Appropriations Committees recreate the list of eligible diseases every year, it is essential that members of Congress continue to show their support for keeping esophageal cancer in the program.

A hallmark of the PRCRP is its focus on high-risk/high-reward research. This is critical for progress in esophageal cancer, a disease with a tragically low survival rate and a huge unmet need for prevention, early detection and cure. The PRCRP approach is inherently different from that of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI). DoD focuses on developing new treatments for the cancers included in PRCRP. NIH and NCI focus on funding the best science, focusing more on research that is already “proven”. Both approaches are valid and necessary. But continuing to include esophageal cancer as a disease eligible for funding under DoD’s PRCRP will give all at-risk Americans a fighting chance for survival and a new hope for the future.

ⁱ Cancer Facts & Figures 2022 American Cancer Society, [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org), 1/2022 accessed 2-7-2022.

ⁱⁱ [38 U.S.C. 1710\(e\)\(1\)\(F\)](#), [38 CFR 17.400](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Using Health Factors Data for VA Health Services Research, Paul G. Barnett, Adam Chow and Nicole E. Flores, February 2014, p. 28; VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for SCREENING AND MANAGEMENT OF OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, 2014, p. 3; Research Letter, JR Kramer, Shakhathreh, AD Naik, Z Duan, HB El-Serag, , JAMA Internal Medicine, January 2014, Use and Yield of Endoscopy in Patients With Uncomplicated Gastroesophageal Reflux Disorder, p E1.

^{iv} Young-Onset Esophageal Incidence, Advanced Disease Diagnosis on the Rise, Hannah Slater, January 2021, <https://www.cancernetwork.com/view/young-onset-esophageal-incidence-advanced-disease-diagnosis-on-the-rise>, accessed 2-24-2021.

^v <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/38/3.309> accessed 2-4-2021.