



## **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. Largely because effective treatments and early detection are rarely available for Esophageal Cancer patients, it is one of America’s deadliest cancers.<sup>i</sup>

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 that U.S. Marine Corps Base in North Carolina from the 1950s to 1987 due to potential exposure to drinking water contaminated with industrial solvents, benzene, and other chemicals.<sup>ii</sup> Most recently, Congress recognized burn pits also expose veterans to a risk of developing Esophageal Cancer with the passage of the *Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022* (PACT Act)<sup>iii</sup>.

In addition, veterans and members of the military are at higher risk for developing 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.<sup>iv</sup> 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 tripled among patients under the age of 50 over the last several decades, making this disease a risk for warfighters and their families as well. Further, patients with early-onset esophageal adenocarcinoma typically present with late-stage disease when the survival rate is the lowest.<sup>v</sup>

### **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, were exposed to radiation or who were exposed to burn pits.<sup>vi</sup>

The heavy burden that Esophageal Cancer has (and is projected to have) on the military and veteran population along with recognition of the link between military service and this deadly cancer by the VA and Congress, Esophageal Cancer clearly meets PRCRP criteria of direct relevance 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 2023, more than \$15 million was awarded for Esophageal Cancer research over the first three years. 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 in FY 2025.

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 supporting progress in the quest to end the cancers included in PRCRP. NIH and NCI focus on funding the best science, targeting 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 provides all at-risk Americans a fighting chance for survival and a new hope for the future.

## **ECAN Calls on Congress to Keep Esophageal Cancer in the DoD’s PRCRP for FY 2025**

- We ask all Senators to sign the Booker/Braun letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on Defense asking that Esophageal Cancer is kept in the PRCRP for FY 2025.
- We ask all Representatives to sign the Loudermilk/Gottheimer letter to the House Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on Defense asking that Esophageal Cancer is kept in the PRCRP for FY 2025.

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<sup>i</sup> Cancer Facts & Figures 2024 American Cancer Society, [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org), accessed 1/23/24.

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

<sup>iii</sup> Public Law 117–168, 87 FR 78543, 38 CFR 3

<sup>iv</sup> 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.

<sup>v</sup> Codipilly DC, et al. [Epidemiology and outcomes of young-onset esophageal adenocarcinoma: An analysis from a population-based database](#). *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*. 2021;30:142.

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