Aviation Teams Have Higher Rates of Cancer

VFW's new top official is a Gulf War veteran who understands that young veterans want to be active

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Researchers found military air and ground aviation crews have higher rates of cancer than the general U.S. population, according to a Department of Defense (DOD)-conducted study.

The report is titled *Study on the Incidence of Cancer Diagnosis and Mortality Among Military Aviators and Aviation Support Personnel*. Researchers followed 156,050 air personnel and 737,891 ground personnel. Active-duty, National Guard and Reserve troops from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps were a part of the study.

The study was published in response to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2021 (P.L. 116-283) mandating that the DOD conduct an aviation cancer study. Air crewmembers observed had a 24 percent higher chance of cancer compared to the U.S. population. Of the airmen studied, statistics revealed that they had:

- An 87 percent higher rate of melanoma (skin cancer)
- A 39 percent higher rate of thyroid cancer
- A 16 percent higher rate of prostate cancer
- A 24 percent higher rate of cancer for all sites

According to the report, ground crewmembers had a 3 percent higher rate of cancer compared to the general population. Troops on the ground also had a:

- 19 percent higher rate of brain and nervous system cancers
- 15 percent higher rate of thyroid cancer
- 9 percent higher rate of melanoma
- 9 percent higher rate of kidney and renal pelvis cancers

Also reported, air crewmembers had a 56 percent lower mortality rate for all cancers when

compared to the rest of the population, and ground crewmembers had a 35 percent lower mortality rate. About half of those observed joined the military before 1990. Available data through 2017 was collected by researchers.

To compare the results of the study to the general U.S. population, researchers used statistics from the Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results Program (SEER). The database is maintained by
the National Institutes of Health and the National Cancer Institute.

P.L. 116-283 also requires additional research about cancers among air and ground troops. The DOD will attempt to identify the following:

- Toxins and hazardous materials associated with military flight operations
- Operating environments associated with increased amounts of radiation
- Duties, dates of service and types of aircraft flown that could have increased the risk for cancers
- Locations associated with a higher incidence of cancers
- Military-related exposures that are not related to aviation
- The appropriate age to begin screening military air and ground crewmembers for cancers

On page 8 of the April 2022 issue of VFW magazine, an article reported that an Air Force study found pilots and crew members who served aboard aircraft from 1970 to 2004 are more likely to be diagnosed with and die from skin or prostate cancer. However, the study only examined aircraft personnel and not ground crew troops. Read the article here.

This article is featured in the 2023 September issue of VFW magazine, and was written by Dave Spiva, associate editor for VFW magazine.