For Veterans, Combat Service Is Tied to Hepatitis B Exposure Risk

A recent study of more than 1,000 veterans found that nearly 1% had hepatitis B and 14% had been exposed to the virus.

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In a study of veterans, researchers found that having served in combat and having been wounded in combat were each independently associated with a higher rate of hepatitis B virus (HBV) exposure, Healio reports.

Publishing their findings in Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Lauren A. Beste, MD, MSc, of the Veterans Affairs Puget Sound Health Care System in Washington, and colleagues studied a random sample of veterans. These 1,146 vets received care from the national Veterans' Health Administration system between 1998 and 2000. They all reported about their HBV risk factors and received blood testing for the virus.

Ninety-seven percent of the veterans were men. On average, they were 62 years old. Forty-three percent reported having served in a combat zone, 13% reported being wounded in combat, 11% reported exposure to blood in combat, 26% reported any risky sexual practice and 4.7% reported ever injecting drugs.

A total of 0.7% of the veterans had chronic HBV, 14% had been exposed to the virus and 6.2% had immunity to the virus.

Factors associated with HBV exposure included the region in which vets served, body piercing, injection drug use, inhaling drugs, high-risk sexual behaviors, incarceration and health care work.

After adjusting the data to account for differences between the participants in demographic and traditional HBV risk factors, the study authors found that having served in a combat zone and having been wounded in combat were associated with a 56% and 79% increased risk of having been exposed to HBV, respectively, compared with not having been through either experience.

"Studies are needed to determine whether veterans with combat exposure before the era of universal vaccination should be screened for HBV exposure," the study authors concluded.

To read the Healio article, click here.

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