

Study on vaccine safety examines medical records

CDC charged with determining safety of anthrax shots

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Lesions scar the body of Chief Petty Officer Luis Hernandez. He has spasms in his legs, arms and sometimes chest. He gets migraine headaches and is severely fatigued.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Andrew Luna is similarly tired. His joints hurt. He's gained weight, has difficulty forming thoughts into words and his testosterone levels have plummeted.

Both say they were completely healthy — until they took the mandatory anthrax vaccine.

"As many years as we've had in service, we've never had a health problem until after we got these shots," said Hernandez, who has nearly 20 years of active and reserve service.

Under congressional order, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is studying the safety of the vaccine, mining military

records for a possible link with poor health.

"A number of people who have received the vaccine ... have complaints and want this looked at," said Dr. Michael McNeil, team leader of the CDC study.

Hernandez, 48, of New York City, got his first three anthrax shots a year ago. The reservist since has had to use 400 hours of sick time from his job as a postmaster in New Jersey. His chest-muscle spasms landed him in an emergency room on New Year's Eve. He has had 11 different skin lesions, from his midsection down, that last from four to six weeks.

Department of Veterans Affairs and Navy doctors say the lesions

are due to a staph infection. But the civilian doctor who initially treated Hernandez didn't know what they were, Hernandez said.

A summary from Walter Reed Regional Vaccine Healthcare Center in Washington, D.C., where he was treated recently, doesn't conclude that the anthrax vaccine caused his ailments. But it notes officials have seen some of his symptoms among other troops after various vaccinations, including anthrax.

"The occurrence of headaches and myalgia following the receipt of vaccines has been well documented," states a copy of the summary given to Hernandez. "The immunopathogenic mechanism of these symptoms has yet to be clearly defined."

Safety studies underway

The CDC already has a study underway at five civilian sites where volunteers are injected with anthrax vaccine either just

under the skin, as is currently licensed, or into the muscle. Experts theorize the latter method will ease the number of local reactions, such as pain and swelling at the point of injection.

"The big question that remains, however, is whether there are longer-term safety issues with the vaccine," McNeil said.

Researchers look to see if the vaccine is connected to arthritis, lupus, vision impairment that may be related to multiple sclerosis, and the skin condition erythema.

Still in the early stages of their work, CDC staff at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and officials with the Defense Medical Surveillance System examine how data gets from the patients' charts to the medical surveillance system. With this knowledge, they can understand what the data can tell them — and its limitations.

Defense officials launched their anthrax vaccination program in 1998, and 1.1 million troops have received at least one shot.

Serious side effects, ranging from severe swelling in the arm that resembles a bacterial skin infection to life-threatening allergic reactions, occur in about 1 in 100,000 people. These can occur after any vaccination, not just anthrax, according to the military's anthrax Web site, www.anthrax.osd.mil.

The Pentagon insists the an-

thrax vaccine is as safe as any other vaccine.

"Scientists have evaluated every organ of the body, and diseases happen at the same rates in anthrax-vaccinated and unvaccinated people," according to a statement posted online by the Defense Department at www.anthrax.osd.mil/vaccine/safe4.asp.

Declining health

Luna, 39, of Abilene, Texas, said he began having problems after his fourth shot. He took to bed for 12 hours but attributed his fatigue to working hard.

But after his fifth shot, "I felt like somebody turned my power level way down," said Luna, who is on medical hold at least until June.

His mind began to cloud, he said, and concentrating and paying attention to details became challenges. About two weeks after his fifth shot, he said he awoke in the night, vomited blood and couldn't breathe.

He still suffers from sleep apnea, fatigue, concentration problems, joint pain and other problems, and needs hormone replacement therapy, he said.

The last time he felt well was July 29 — the day before his fifth and final anthrax shot. "I don't think of myself as an old person," he said. "I'm angry about the way I feel right now." □



Hernandez