

Radiation treatment called threat to former servicemen

Therapy for inner-ear ailments administered to thousands

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The Pentagon said yesterday that thousands of former Navy submarine crewmen and Army Air Force aircrew, whose inner-ear ailments were treated with radiation, may risk developing further health problems.

Officials did not say what those problems might be.

But they announced that the Department of Veterans Affairs will contact veterans whose military medical files show they received the radiation treatment. They will be advised to tell their doctors of the past treatment "so it may be considered when they receive medical examinations," the Pentagon said.

In a lengthy report on radiation experiments and medical treatments of military personnel during the Cold War, the Pentagon said it is working with the Department of Veterans Affairs to identify those veterans given the nasal radium treatments.

A Pentagon official who helped prepare the report said the exact number of servicemen who were given the radium treatment was not known, but that it was in the thousands. An undetermined number of military dependents

also received the treatment. He said he could not discuss potential health problems that may have resulted.

From the 1940s to the mid-1960s, the use of nasal applicators containing 50 milligrams of radium was a common and effective means of shrinking lymphoid tissue at the entrance of the eustachian tubes to allow the tubes to drain. The eustachian tubes help the ear to drain and balance pressure on the inner and outer ear.

The military stopped using the treatment when pressurized aircraft cabins came into use and effective new medical treatments, such as antibiotics and tympanic tubes, were developed.

The Army Air Force used radium treatments on an unspecified number of airmen whose inflamed lymphoid tissue had kept them from flying. The Navy used the treatments on submarine crewmen with ear pressure problems, including 732 men involved in a 1940s study by researchers at the Submarine Medical Research Laboratory in New London, Conn.

Before it became an independent service in 1947, the Air Force was known as the Army Air Force.

The Pentagon report released

yesterday said a log book detailing the 1944-45 experiment — including study data and the names of about 1,600 participants — is being reviewed and analyzed "to determine appropriate action."

The Pentagon said the use of radiation for treatment of inner-ear problems is the only Defense Department project involving humans in radiation research that would require officials to notify participants.

The presidential Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, which issued its final report on Cold War-era human radiation experiments two years ago, recommended that participants be notified and given medical follow-up "if there is a significant risk of developing a radiation-induced condition."

The nasal-radiation project is the only one that would meet that criteria of notification, the Pentagon said.

The Department of Veterans Affairs also is considering proposing legislation to allow veterans who were given the nasal-radiation treatment — whether documented or not — to participate in the department's ionizing radiation registry examination program.