

# Sailors, airmen got radioactive treatments

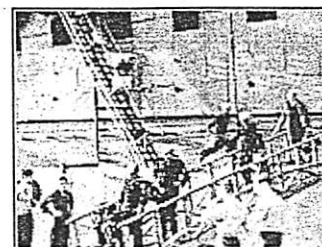


## Thousands exposed from 1940s to mid-1960s

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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Thousands of Americans who served in the Air Force or Navy from the 1940s to the mid-1960s face possible health risks because of radiation treatments they were given while in the military, according to a Pentagon report released Wednesday.



A new report says servicemen were treated with radiation  
(CNN/file)

### CNN's Carl Rochelle reports

The report also provides more details about military-sponsored radiation experiments undertaken in the early years of the nuclear era, the existence of which was first publicly disclosed two years ago.

The subjects of those tests included Eskimos in Alaska, African-American hospital patients in Ohio, Mennonite conscientious objectors, and retarded schoolchildren in Massachusetts.

The report says the military used radium rods to treat submariners and airmen who were suffering ear and sinus problems caused by rapid pressure changes related to depth and altitude. The procedure was discontinued in the mid-1960s when pressurized cabins came into use and more effective treatments were developed.

The exact number of sailors and airmen who received the treatments isn't known, but Pentagon officials say it could be in the thousands. The Department of Veterans Affairs has launched an effort to try to contact as many of them as the agency can locate.

The treatment typically involved the use of radioactive radium rods that were pushed through each nostril and placed against the openings of the eustacian tubes for six to 12 minutes. Repeated over a period of months, the treatment would shrink the patients' adenoids, relieving ear pressure and improving problems with balance.

In the 1940s and 1950s, it was common practice for both civilian and military doctors to use radium as a treatment in this way. A doctor's log book from the era showed that the treatment had a 90 percent success rate.

In its report, the Pentagon does not admit that the radiation treatments have caused any long-term health problems, saying studies establishing a link are inconclusive.

However, the military does acknowledge that there is a "significant risk" of a connection, and those subjected to the treatment are being urged to advise their doctors "so it may be considered when they receive medical examinations."

Children who had inner-ear problems -- military dependents -- are also believed to have received the radium treatments. But the report makes no mention of any notification effort to warn them about the possible long-term effects.

In 1995, a presidential study panel reported that the U.S. Department of Energy and its predecessor, the Atomic Energy Commission, conducted medical experiments involving radiation from the 1940s into the 1970s.



Wednesday's Pentagon report came in response to an order from President Clinton that the military provide details of all medical experiments that it has sponsored between 1944 and 1994, including those during the Cold War years that involved exposing test subjects to radiation.

The report said nearly 2,400 military medical studies were performed in that half century. Defense Secretary William Cohen said in a foreword to the report that most were, at the time, "common and routine medical practices."

However, some of the studies listed did involve exposing patients to radiation. While senior Pentagon officials say the subjects were advised about the nature of the testing, they admit it is questionable whether some of the patients really understood what they were agreeing to do.

Among the studies outlined in the report:

- Eskimos in Alaska were given radioactive iodine-131 by the Air Force in the 1950s. The objective was to study thyroid activity in men exposed to cold. The government is now negotiating compensation for some of those Eskimos.
- Cancer patients at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine were given full-body radiation. More than 60 percent of the patients were indigent African-Americans with low IQs.
- Mennonite conscientious objectors were used in taste tests of irradiated foods in 1956.
- Children at a school for the mentally retarded in Waltham, Massachusetts, were fed radiation-laced cereal.

Correspondent Carl Rochelle and Reuters contributed to this report.

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