

Pentagon won't rule out gas antidote as syndrome cause

By ROBERT BURNS
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Pentagon raised the possibility yesterday that a nerve gas antidote taken by as many as 50,000 U.S. troops in the 1991 Persian Gulf War may be a cause of the mysterious Gulf War syndrome that has left thousands of veterans with unexplained maladies.

Presenting the results of an extensive review of existing scientific studies of the antidote, known as pyridostigmine bromide, or PB, Pentagon officials said they cannot rule out the possibility of a link. On the other hand, they said much more study is needed before they can reach a firm conclusion.

"We just don't know," said Bernard Rostker, head of the Defense Department's Gulf War illnesses investigations.

Among the veterans who took PB while serving in the Gulf is James Silvester, 28, of Odessa, Texas, who said in an interview yesterday he sometimes suffers from headaches and peeling skin that he believes is related to his wartime service.

"I'm glad they haven't ruled that out as a cause," Silvester said of the PB investigation. "Of course we do have some sick veterans who never got the PB or anything like that."

One of the leading critics of the Pentagon's investigation of possible causes of Gulf War syndrome, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, R-W.Va., said the Pentagon never should

have given troops PB in the first place.

"In my view, the conclusion was inescapable that military men and women were being needlessly subjected to a possibly unsafe and ineffective treatment," Rockefeller said. "We were using an experimental drug, without informed consent."

The review, conducted by the Rand Corp., a Pentagon-financed research group in Santa Monica, Calif., examined about 1,000 published studies on PB, which has been used for decades to treat the neurological disease myasthenia gravis.

During the Gulf War, it was given to troops as protection against potential attack by the nerve agent soman, even though there was no evidence to suggest

Iraq had soman or had weaponized it.

Beatrice Alexandra Golomb of Rand Corp., who headed the review, told a Pentagon news conference she concluded that PB cannot be ruled out as a cause of the ill-defined Gulf War symptoms.

"This does not imply that it is necessarily a causal factor, only that the possibility cannot be dismissed," she wrote. She is a physician at San Diego Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

The Pentagon said more research will be conducted. In the meantime, the results show the Pentagon must learn more not only about what happened in the Gulf but also about the effectiveness of PB.

"This work breaks new ground, presenting a great deal of information that wasn't

available to decision-makers during the Gulf War," Rostker said.

Rostker said that in the future the Pentagon would consider more carefully before giving PB to soldiers. Yet, if there were credible evidence that soman was a threat to U.S. troops, he would recommend they take the drug, he said, since it is the only known defense against the deadly nerve gas.

To date the Pentagon has spent \$133 million searching for causes of Gulf War syndrome. Among the potential causes examined but determined to be unlikely are psychological stress and exposure to chemical weapons. Rostker said yesterday he doubts the Pentagon will ever find a single cause for the mysterious maladies.

Report: Eligible children lack child-care subsidies

By LAURA MECKLER
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Just 15 percent of low- and moderate-income children eligible for government-financed child care are getting the subsidies, the government reported yesterday.

Almost 9.9 million kids qualify, but just over 1.5 million actually get the help last year, said the report released by Donna Shalala, secretary of Health and Human Services, who used the findings to urge more spending on child care.

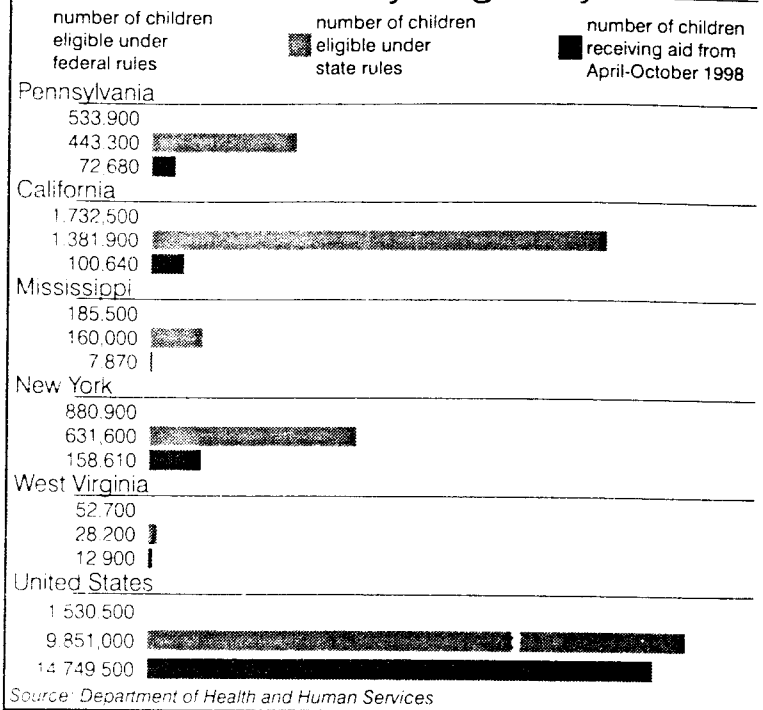
"The clock is ticking for Congress to act," she said. "For working parents and their children, there's not a moment to lose."

Participation rates varied considerably across the country, from West Virginia, where 45 percent of eligible children were enrolled, to Mississippi, with just 7 percent. In Pennsylvania, the department said 72,680 children are receiving child-care subsidies, 16.4 percent of the 443,300 eligible for such assistance under state guidelines.

Under the programs, states offer child-care subsidies on a sliding scale, with the aid phasing out as a family's income grows.

States were slow to begin spending extra money allocated for child care in the 1996 welfare overhaul. Now they have spent virtually every dollar available, and then some, the HHS report said.

Child-care subsidy eligibility



Last year, states spent \$3.5 billion in federal and state money.

Much of the state spending was required to qualify for federal dollars, but states spent \$686 million more than required in welfare money in order to help more children.

In his budget proposal for 2000, President Clinton asked Congress for \$19 billion over five years in

increased child-care money. That included more for subsidies and more in tax credits for working parents and for parents who forgo a second income to stay home with children.

"Children are priceless, and we shouldn't nickel and dime them when it comes to providing safe and affordable child care," said Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn.,

who joined with Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt., to push for more spending.

Congressional Republicans have shown interest in the tax credits but are wary of increased subsidies, noting that subsidies already were increased in 1996. They note that many states have excess welfare money that can be used for child care.

"States have plenty of money to spend on child care in the coming years as more and more welfare beneficiaries return to work, and I'm working on ways to provide even more flexibility to states so they can meet this growing need," said a statement from Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn., chairman of the House Ways and Means welfare subcommittee.

Clinton pushed for major new child-care spending last year, too, but none was included in the deal he negotiated with the GOP at the end of the year.

This year it will be a priority, said Melissa Skolfield, HHS spokeswoman. She said since prospects for a significant overhaul of Medicare have fallen, child care will rise as a priority for the department and the White House.

In its HHS spending bill, the Senate approved \$1 billion in increased child-care subsidies, although how to pay for it was unclear.

The House bill included no new money, and the two bills are being reconciled.

Study: Vitamin E lowers cancer risk

By PAUL RECER
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A diet rich in vitamin E foods such as nuts and whole grains can lower the risk of lung cancer among smokers by about 20 percent, a new study says.

In the study of more than 29,000 male smokers in Finland, researchers found that those who had high blood levels of alpha-tocopherol, the main form of vitamin E, reduced their incidence of lung cancer by 19 percent to 23 percent.

The benefits were most dramatic, the study found, among men under age 60 and among light smokers who had been using cigarettes for less than 40 years. The reduction in lung cancer risk in these groups was from 40 percent to 50 percent.

Despite the encouraging finding, said Dr. Demetrius Albanes of the National Cancer Institute, the most beneficial health action smokers can take is still the same: Stop smoking.

"We have to emphasize that not only for lung cancer, but for oral cancer, pancreas cancer, kidney cancer and a bunch of other cancers, stopping smoking is crucial," said Albanes, the senior author of the study being published today in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute.

In the study, which lasted for

almost eight years, researchers took periodic blood samples to measure the levels of alpha-tocopherol, the most active form of vitamin E in humans.

The levels of alpha-tocopherol were then linked to health outcomes among the men in the study. There were 1,144 cases of lung cancer diagnosed in the group during the study.

The lung cancer rate reduced among men with the highest levels of alpha-tocopherol, said Albanes, and the cancer protection was most pronounced among men with the shortest history of smoking who also had high vitamin E levels.

Although the new study involved only smokers and lung cancer, earlier studies have shown that healthy levels of vitamin E give some protection against heart disease, stroke and some other types of cancer, such as prostate cancer.

Albanes said the proven benefits came only from a balanced diet that included food rich in vitamin E, he said.

The researchers drew no conclusions about the effect of vitamin pills taken by some of the men in the study.

In effect, he said the proven benefits of vitamin E come from eating the right foods, not from popping vitamin pills.

"We need more studies to compare supplements with natural diet sources of vitamin E," he said.

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