



Highlights of [GAO-08-366](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Tens of thousands of military personnel and civilians were potentially exposed to chemical or biological substances through Department of Defense (DOD) tests since World War II. DOD conducted some of these tests as part of its Project 112 test program, while others were conducted as separate efforts. GAO was asked to (1) assess DOD's efforts to identify individuals who were potentially exposed during Project 112 tests, (2) evaluate DOD's current effort to identify individuals who were potentially exposed during tests conducted outside of Project 112, and (3) determine the extent to which DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have taken action to notify individuals who might have been exposed during chemical and biological tests. GAO analyzed documents and interviewed officials from DOD, VA, the Department of Labor, and a veterans service organization.

What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress direct DOD to develop guidance to notify potentially exposed civilians. GAO also recommends that DOD and VA take steps to improve their efforts to obtain, share, and use available information to more effectively identify and notify individuals. DOD and VA generally agreed with most of the recommendations. However, DOD did not agree with the recommendation to conduct a cost-benefit analysis regarding additional Project 112 research. As a result, GAO suggests that Congress direct DOD to conduct such an analysis.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-366](#). For more information, contact Davi M. D'Agostino at (202) 512-5431 or dagostinod@gao.gov.

CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL DEFENSE

DOD and VA Need to Improve Efforts to Identify and Notify Individuals Potentially Exposed during Chemical and Biological Tests

What GAO Found

Since 2003, DOD has stopped actively searching for individuals who were potentially exposed to chemical or biological substances during Project 112 tests, but did not provide a sound and documented basis for that decision. In 2003, DOD reported it had identified 5,842 servicemembers and estimated 350 civilians as having been potentially exposed during Project 112, and indicated that DOD would cease actively searching for additional individuals. However, in 2004, GAO reported that DOD did not exhaust all possible sources of information and recommended that DOD determine the feasibility of identifying additional individuals. In response to GAO's recommendation, DOD determined continuing an active search for individuals had reached the point of diminishing returns, and reaffirmed its decision to cease active searches. This decision was not supported by an objective analysis of the potential costs and benefits of continuing the effort, nor could DOD provide any documented criteria from which it made its determination. Since June 2003, however, non-DOD sources—including the Institute of Medicine—have identified approximately 600 additional names of individuals who were potentially exposed during Project 112. Until DOD provides a more objective analysis of the costs and benefits of actively searching for Project 112 participants, DOD's efforts may continue to be questioned.

DOD has taken action to identify individuals who were potentially exposed during tests outside of Project 112, but GAO identified four shortcomings in DOD's current effort. First, DOD's effort lacks clear and consistent objectives, scope of work, and information needs that would set the parameters for its effort. Second, DOD has not provided adequate oversight to guide this effort. Third, DOD has not fully leveraged information obtained from previous research efforts that identified exposed individuals. Fourth, DOD's effort lacks transparency since it has not kept Congress and veterans service organizations fully informed of the progress and results of its effort. Until DOD addresses these limitations, Congress, veterans, and the American public cannot be assured that DOD's current effort is reasonable and effective.

DOD and VA have had limited success in notifying individuals potentially exposed during tests both within and outside Project 112. DOD has a process to share the names of identified servicemembers with VA; however, DOD has delayed regular updates to VA because of a number of factors, such as competing priorities. Furthermore, although VA has a process for notifying potentially exposed veterans, it was not using certain available resources to obtain contact information to notify veterans or to help determine whether they were deceased. Moreover, DOD had not taken any action to notify identified civilians, focusing instead on veterans since the primary impetus for the research has been requests from VA. DOD has refrained from taking action on notifying civilians in part because it lacks specific guidance that defines the requirements to notify civilians. Until these issues are addressed, some identified veterans and civilians will remain unaware of their potential exposure.