

Facts & Figures – A call to action and the HELP4HEROES program

We know that the risk for our service men and women is very real – even if we cannot predict the exact number of soldiers who will be harmed, we know that trauma to the brain, whether mild or severe, is a clearly defined risk factor for epilepsy. Past studies from the Vietnam War show that more than 50% of service related traumatic brain injury becomes epilepsy within 1-15 years after the trauma.

Another study in Iran, conducted between 1980 and 1988, looking at soldiers in the Iran-Iraq war, showed 32% of penetrating head injury became epilepsy within 6 to 24 months.

Today's story is a bit different. The common head trauma in Iraq is the result of a "shock wave" effect of high pressure that reverberates through the body and head from an explosion like those from the Improvised Explosive Devices or IEDs. Researchers fear that incidence of posttraumatic epilepsy could increase exponentially given the shock wave effect from IEDs.

When dealing with severe brain trauma it is important that the VA and all organizations that serve veterans with epilepsy learn as much as possible about the signs and impacts of these devastating injuries.

- ★ Among 105 casualties assessed between June and October 2003, doctors discovered that about two-thirds, or 67 percent, sustained brain injuries, according to Dr. Laurie Ryan, a neuropsychologist at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.
- ★ Veteran's Affairs-funded research conducted in collaboration with the Department of Defense found that 53 percent of veterans who suffered a penetrating TBI in Vietnam developed epilepsy within 15 years. A full 15 percent did not manifest epilepsy for more than five years after their combat injury.
- ★ The incidence of seizures in the first year after head trauma is 12.7 times the risk of unprovoked seizures in the general population.