From Diagnosis to Benefits: Bridging Gaps in VA Information for Veterans With Toxic-Exposure-Related Bladder Cancer

Marlon Burton II[1] OMS-III, Folasade Olowe[1] OMS-III
[1]Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine, Dublin, Ohio

Background

- Bladder cancer is a VA presumptive condition for Veterans with qualifying exposure to Agent Orange, Camp Lejeune contaminated water, Gulf War and post-9/11 toxic exposures (including burn pits), or ionizing radiation.[1–4]
- Presumptive status means eligible Veterans do not have to prove that service caused their cancer, but they first have to learn that the connection exists.
- Veterans may enter VA's digital ecosystem through disease, exposure, health-navigation, or benefits pages; it is unclear whether these entry points consistently connect the diagnosis to exposure, eligibility, health care, and benefits.

Objective

- Are Veterans with bladder cancer presented with a coherent digital pathway connecting diagnosis, military toxic exposure, presumptive eligibility, health care, and benefits, or are these components distributed across separate VA entry points?

Methods

Search: Structured web searches for bladder cancer, each presumptive exposure pathway, PACT Act, toxic exposure screening, registries, and claims, plus review of links on included VA hub pages (October 2026).

Design: Of 53 screened resources, 37 met all criteria below and were categorized by primary purpose: disease-centered (n=5), exposure-centered (n=13), exposure/health-navigation (n=10), benefits/navigation (n=9).

Coding: Eight prespecified binary domains, scored from the resource itself without following hyperlinks.

Reliability: Two reviewers coded all resources independently; disagreements were adjudicated using prespecified definitions.

Sensitivity analysis: Health-navigation and benefits categories were combined to test whether the primary finding depended on category boundaries.

Inclusion (all required)	Exclusion (any one)
• Official VA domain (va.gov and subdomains) • National scope • Public, no login • Veteran-, family-, or survivor-facing • Addresses bladder cancer, a bladder-cancer presumptive pathway, or toxic-exposure care, eligibility, or benefits • Web page or national patient-education PDF • Live on review date	• Facility- or VISN-level pages • Legal or regulatory documents • Clinician-, researcher-, or media-only content • Forms, applications, login portals, directories • Video, podcasts, social media, apps • News not naming bladder cancer in title or first paragraph; superseded announcements • Duplicates and non-VA sources

Results

Figure 1. Content domains on each VA resource (N=37) ✓ present – absent

Resource	BC named	Expo-sure	Pre-sump.	Eligi-bility	Health action	Bene-fits	BC clinical	VA links
Disease-centered (n=5)								
Bladder Cancer & Veterans (VA News)	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓	✓
Bladder Cancer: Know the Signs (VA News)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓
NOP Bladder Cancer Infographic (PDF)	✓	✓	–	–	✓	–	✓	–
Cancers Made Presumptive (press release, 2025)	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Cancer Care at VA: FAQ	✓	–	–	–	✓	–	–	✓
Exposure-centered (n=13)								
Agent Orange (Public Health)	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Agent Orange & Disability Compensation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Camp Lejeune: Past Water Contamination	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Camp Lejeune Health Issues (Disability)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Burn Pits & Environmental Hazards	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Presumptive Cancers: Burn Pit Exposure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
PACT Act (Public Health)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Ionizing Radiation Diseases (Public Health)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Hazardous Chemicals & Materials	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Gulf War Illnesses (Disability)	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Ionizing Radiation (Disability)	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Gulf War Exposures (Public Health)	–	✓	–	✓	✓	–	–	✓
Military Exposures Hub (Public Health)	–	✓	–	–	✓	–	–	✓
Exposure / health-navigation (n=10)								
Military Exposures (Veterans Health Library)	–	✓	–	–	✓	–	–	✓
VET-HOME	–	✓	–	✓	✓	–	–	✓
Vietnam War Health Issues	–	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Burn Pit Registry	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Agent Orange Registry Exam	–	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Ionizing Radiation Registry Exam	–	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Gulf War Registry Exam	–	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Environmental Health Registry Overview	–	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Toxic Exposure Screening (WRIISC)	–	✓	–	–	–	✓	–	✓
How to Apply for VA Health Care	–	–	–	–	✓	✓	–	✓
Benefits / navigation (n=9)								
The PACT Act and Your VA Benefits	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Evidence Needed for Your Claim	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Supplemental Claims	–	–	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Toxic Exposure Benefits Journey Map (PDF)	–	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
How to File a Disability Claim	–	–	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Get Help Filing Your Claim	–	–	–	–	–	✓	–	✓
Eligibility for Disability Benefits	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Decision Reviews & Appeals	–	–	–	–	–	✓	–	✓
Dependency & Indemnity Compensation	–	–	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓
All resources (n=37)	**12**	**30**	**16**	**28**	**23**	**29**	**3**	**36**

Bladder cancer was named in every disease-centered resource but in none of the 19 health-navigation or benefits resources.

Figure 2. Names bladder cancer vs. offers a benefits action, by entry-point type

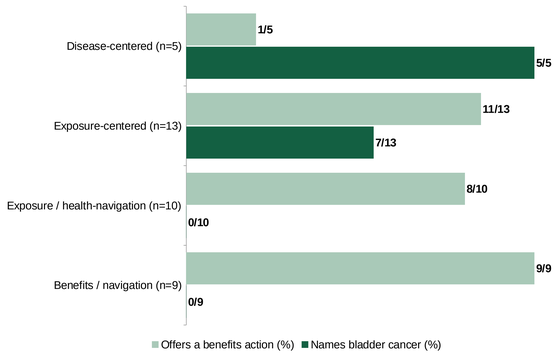

Table 1. Inter-rater agreement before adjudication, % (κ)

Domain	Original 15	Added 22
Names bladder cancer	93% (0.87)	95% (0.83)
Exposure link	87% (0.44)	95% (0.89)
Presumption explained	47% (0.00)	91% (0.74)
Eligibility criteria	67% (0.24)	86% (0.67)
Health action	60% (0.29)	95% (0.91)
Benefits action	67% (0.19)	64% (0.23)
Bladder clinical guidance	100% (1.00)	100% (1.00)
Links to VA resources	100% (NE)	100% (1.00)
Overall decisions	**93/120 (78%)**	**160/176 (91%)**

Combined: 253/296 decisions (85%). NE = not estimable.

Overall (n=37): named bladder cancer 32%, exposure link 81%, presumption 43%, eligibility 76%, health action 62%, benefits action 78%, VA links 97%.

Bladder clinical guidance: only 3/37 (8%), all disease-centered; none of these offered a benefits action.

No resource covered all eight domains. Six exposure pages covered every domain except bladder clinical guidance.

Discussion

- Bladder-cancer information was concentrated in disease- and exposure-focused resources, while health-navigation and benefits resources carried the administrative content (benefits actions in 17/19, eligibility criteria in 14/19) without naming the disease.
- The pieces of a Veteran's pathway exist, but they are distributed by entry point: no resource paired bladder-specific clinical guidance with a benefits action.
- Agreement was 85% overall and 95% for bladder-cancer identification (35/37); benefits-action agreement was lower (64% in the added resources), suggesting that definition needs refinement.
- **Limitations**: point-in-time snapshot; entry-page content only; web-based search may miss resources; presence does not establish comprehension.

Policy proposal: one integrated bladder-cancer pathway

1. **Diagnosis or warning signs** e.g., hematuria
2. **Military exposure history** service, location, dates
3. **Presumptive pathway** Agent Orange · Camp Lejeune · Gulf War/post-9/11 · radiation
4. **VA health evaluation** care, screening, exposure assessment
5. **Eligibility criteria** qualifying service and conditions
6. **Benefits and claims** file, submit evidence, request review

Conclusion

- Bladder-cancer clinical and administrative information is distributed across different VA digital entry points.
- **Policy opportunity**: VA could create one Veteran-facing bladder-cancer pathway connecting disease information, all applicable exposure presumptions, eligibility, health evaluation, and claims, with reciprocal links from exposure and benefits pages.
- **Clinical advocacy opportunity**: at diagnosis, urologists can ask about military service and exposure history and direct potentially eligible Veterans to VA presumptive resources.

References

1. 38 C.F.R. §3.309(d), (f): presumptive diseases for ionizing radiation and Camp Lejeune contaminated water.
2. William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for FY2021, Pub. L. 116-283 (bladder cancer added to Agent Orange presumptions).
3. VA. Presumptive service connection for bladder, ureter, and related genitourinary cancers due to exposure to fine particulate matter. Interim final rule. Fed Regist. January 2, 2025.
4. VA. The PACT Act and your VA benefits. VA.gov. Accessed October 2026.