

Institutional Tobacco Exposure Among U.S. Navy Ship and Submarine Personnel

Executive Summary

For decades, tobacco use aboard U.S. Navy ships and submarines was not merely permitted but institutionally embedded into daily operations, stress management, watch rotations, and morale policies. Service members assigned to enclosed maritime environments were routinely exposed to both direct tobacco use and secondhand smoke for prolonged periods. This paper asserts that tobacco exposure aboard naval vessels constitutes an institutional exposure comparable to other recognized occupational hazards and warrants formal consideration in veterans' disability evaluations.

1. Historical Navy Tobacco Policy and Practice

The U.S. Navy historically allowed and facilitated tobacco use aboard vessels. Cigarettes and smokeless tobacco were sold through ship stores at subsidized prices via the Navy Exchange System (NEXCOM). Smoking breaks were commonly integrated into watch rotations and duty schedules. Indoor smoking areas were permitted aboard ships and submarines until policy changes in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

2. Environmental Conditions Aboard Ships and Submarines

Surface combatants and auxiliary vessels feature enclosed berthing compartments and shared ventilation systems, which historically allowed tobacco smoke to migrate throughout living and working spaces. Submarines operate in sealed environments with controlled atmospheric systems designed to recycle air for extended submerged operations. These systems historically did not remove tobacco particulates effectively, resulting in persistent secondhand smoke exposure.

3. Secondhand Smoke as an Occupational Exposure

The U.S. Surgeon General and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have concluded that secondhand smoke causes COPD, emphysema, ischemic heart disease, and lung cancer, and that no safe level of exposure exists. Navy personnel experienced continuous, involuntary exposure during official duties, meeting criteria for occupational exposure rather than personal lifestyle choice.

4. VA Adjudication Disparity

VA disability adjudication frequently categorizes tobacco exposure as voluntary behavior, without sufficient consideration of institutional policies, environmental constraints, and secondhand exposure unique to naval service. This contrasts with VA recognition of other confined-environment exposures such as asbestos aboard ships.

5. Proposed Recognition Framework

VIEI advocates for formal recognition of shipboard and submarine tobacco exposure as institutional exposure, consideration of secondhand smoke as a primary causal factor, use of vessel assignment and era of service as exposure indicators, and development of VA guidance specific to naval environments.

Conclusion

Tobacco exposure aboard U.S. Navy ships and submarines was systemic, unavoidable, and command-sanctioned for decades. Veterans should not be denied recognition or compensation based on assumptions of personal choice when exposure occurred as a direct consequence of institutional policy and operational necessity.

References

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