

Elite US Army units stop taking anti-malarial drug

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The top doctor for elite U.S. Army commandos has told troops to immediately stop taking mefloquine, an anti-malaria drug found to cause permanent brain damage in rare cases.

The ban among special operations forces is the latest development in a long-running controversy over mefloquine. The drug was developed by the Army in the 1970s and has been taken by millions of travelers and people in the military over the years. As alternatives were developed, it fell out of favor as the front-line defense against malaria, a mosquito-borne disease that international health officials say kills roughly 600,000 people a year.

The new prohibition follows a July 29 safety announcement by the Food and Drug Administration that it had strengthened warnings about neurologic side effects associated with the drug. The FDA added a boxed warning to the drug label, the most serious kind of warning, saying side effects like dizziness, [loss of balance](#) and ringing in the ears may become permanent.

The drug's other side effects include anxiety, depression and hallucinations—conditions that some military families over the years believe prompted [psychotic behavior](#) in their loved ones, including killings and suicides.

Quoting the FDA's July safety warning, the Surgeon General's Office of the Army Special Operations Command sent a message to commanders

and medical personnel last Friday ordering a halt in prescribing mefloquine for [malaria prevention](#) for the approximately 25,000 soldiers, command spokesman Lt. Col. Dave Connolly said.

"What this is is a wake-up call telling troops, 'Look, you've been misinformed,'" said Remington Nevin, a former Army physician and [epidemiologist](#) who studies the psychiatric effects of anti-malarial toxicity.

Nevin says the Pentagon should have stopped using the drug years ago, particularly because it confounds diagnosis of PTSD and [traumatic brain injury](#), two signature health issues of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Others point out that the drug has been effective in preventing malaria, and many people have preferred it because it is less expensive and has to be taken less often than alternatives.

Mefloquine is still prescribed to the traveling public and to volunteers in the Peace Corps, which also has reduced its use.

The Pentagon says it doesn't have data on the number troops who may have suffered ill effects from the drug. But two days after the FDA announcement, the department began a review "of potential neuropsychological effects on service members who were prescribed mefloquine," said Lt. Col. Cathy Wilkinson, a defense spokeswoman.

The review is expected to be finished in January.

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