

Health campaigns have reduced armed forces veterans' risk of heart attacks

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(Medical Xpress)—Veterans who joined the Armed Forces in the 1960s and 1970s have suffered more heart attacks than their contemporaries who have never been in the military, according to a study by the University of Glasgow.

However, those who completed their service more recently are no longer at increased risk. The higher risk among older [veterans](#) was probably due to them being much more likely to smoke than their non-military contemporaries.

Recent health promotion campaigns adopted by the military have been successful in reducing smoking and the long term benefits are now being seen in younger veterans.

Researchers in the Institute of Health and Wellbeing looked at computerised and anonymised health records of 57,000 Scottish veterans who were born between 1945 and 1985 and served between 1960 and 2012. They compared their health records in later life with that of 173,000 non-service individuals to see if veterans were more likely to develop a range of health conditions including heart disease, cancer and [mental health problems](#).

Their first report from the study, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, shows that older veterans born in the 1940s and 1950s were more likely to suffer a [heart attack](#) than non-veterans of the same age. However, younger veterans have a similar risk to the wider

population.

Dr Beverly Bergman, a PhD student and former British Army soldier and senior military doctor, conducted the research under the supervision of Professor Jill Pell. She said: "We wanted to do this research to improve understanding of veterans' health. We also want to provide important information to help local authorities, health boards, charities and the armed forces, to plan support services for veterans.

"There used to be a culture of heavy smoking and drinking in the army, but improved physical fitness and health promotion initiatives within the forces, which really came to the fore from the late 1970s onwards seem to have contributed to improved health, hence the difference we see between the two groups. It emphasises the importance of not smoking. Veterans who smoke can really make a difference by giving up.

"This is one of the few studies of its kind and is only really possible thanks to the excellent [health records](#) that Scotland has. It has shown us that we should not just be looking at veterans' mental [health](#), as we now know they are at risk from heart attacks as well.

More information: Beverly P. Bergman, Daniel F. Mackay, and Jill P. Pell. "Acute Myocardial Infarction in Scottish Military Veterans: A Retrospective Cohort Study of 57,000 Veterans and 173,000 Matched Nonveterans." *Am. J. Epidemiol.* first published online May 8, 2014 [DOI: 10.1093/aje/kwu082](https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwu082)

Provided by University of Glasgow

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