

DEPLETED URANIUM (DU)

What is depleted uranium (DU)?

DU is a heavy metal byproduct of the nuclear fuel and weapons industries.

The uranium remaining after enriched part removal is depleted uranium or DU.

It is cheap and available in huge quantities in the United States.

It burns easily, is toxic like lead, is low-level radioactive, and is 2.5x denser than steel.

Where is DU used?

The main military use of DU is in projectiles designed to penetrate tanks armor at high speed. DU self-sharpens as it penetrates armor, goes straight through it and then erupts in a burning cloud of dust and metal inside the tank, and sets fire to its fuel, ammo and soldiers. DU fragments can be embedded as shrapnel in soldiers and can contaminate battlefields. DU can be inhaled and into the lungs. Missiles and bullets also contain DU.

Who uses DU?

The Americans and the British used vast amounts of DU in both the 1991 Gulf War and the present Iraq War. Over 350 tons of DU were used in Desert Storm, 11 tons in the Balkan War, and 75 tons (unofficial estimate) in the Iraq War. DU weapons are said to be present in the arsenals of France, Russia, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Pakistan, Thailand, and Taiwan.

What are the health concerns related to DU?

- There is a huge amount of controversy about the health effects of DU.

In the months and years following Gulf War I, a large number of soldiers have had unexplained health problems like leukemias and other cancers, Lou Gherig disease, birth defects in their kids, and other symptoms; it's called "Gulf War Syndrome".

Possible causes are multiple; the vets had been exposed to a variety of risky things including pesticides, insect repellents, multiple vaccinations combos, low level chemical warfare agents, and oil fires, as well as DU but many believe DU is a major cause.

- In southern Iraq, women who lived near the battlefields or whose husbands had fought in Gulf War I had seven times more babies with birth defects. Some of these survived with "harelip" or absent arms or legs, but others were stillborn with terrible malformations. Doctors noted increased childhood and adult leukemias and miscarriages.

- Links to DU are not clear; other factors include industrial pollution, poor prenatal care, Hussein's use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War in the 80's and poor nutrition related in part to the UN/US sanctions imposed on the people after Gulf War I.

What studies have been done on DU effects in veterans and exposed civilians?

No large studies of veterans or civilians exposed to DU have been done in the US, UK or Iraq! Thirty veterans with embedded DU shrapnel have been studied in the UK and continue to excrete uranium after 10 years. US Gulf War veterans with DU shrapnel in them showed urine uranium 7 years after initial injury, indicating continued exposure

to the whole body, with subtle effects in the reproductive and central nervous systems of the DU-exposed veterans. Only 29 men were studied though around 900-1000 vets were exposed. Official US, UK and NATO reports have downplayed the dangers of DU.

In contrast, some opponents of DU weapons believe that exposure to DU is the direct cause of the excess cancers, birth defects and the syndrome listed above.

- Dr. Rosalie Bertell, President of the International Institute of Concerns for Public Health, lectured at the Hague Peace Conference in 1999, reporting kidney and lung damage by uranium compounds in humans, and numerous animal experiments with ill effects. In the test tube, DU can change normal bone cells into tumor types; it can interfere with rat brain functioning, and can cross the placentas of animals to their young.
- The Laka Foundation, a Dutch antinuclear organization, campaigned against the use of DU weaponry, showing contamination of war zones with radioactive toxic dust of DU aerosol, easily inhaled or ingested, and staying in the body for years. DU dust in the wind may contaminate water, soil and food.

What are the recommendations of international organizations?

The World Health Organization recommends cordoning off and clean-up operations in impact zones where experts deem DU levels to be unacceptable. WHO notes that small children could receive greater exposure to DU when playing in or near impact sites. Levels of DU contamination of food and drinking water should be monitored.

The European Union and the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) have called for a ban on DU weapons. IPPNW and WHO recommended independent studies of DU exposure of vets and civilians, asking US and NATO to fund.

Were these recommendations followed in the Iraq War?

DU weaponry was used in the current Iraq War. Scott Peterson, a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor, measured with a counter high levels of radiation left by US armor-piercing shells. He noted children playing in burned-out tanks and handling DU bullets in Baghdad. In only two of multiple sites visited were signs in Arabic posted

to warn civilians. DU contaminated ash piles present yielded highly elevated radioactive emissions. DU-contaminated sites were located only a few paces from food stalls.

No cordoning off or cleanup of sites was noted. No UN experts were present to evaluate.

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