



The **National Association**
for **Proton Therapy**



NAPT WHITE PAPER

Supporting the Inclusion of Proton Therapy in the **Veterans Health Administration Coverage Policy** for Radiation Cancer Treatment

Introducing a bill that supports the inclusion of proton therapy in the VHA coverage policy for radiation cancer treatment is a crucial step toward improving the lives of veterans.

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Supporting the Inclusion of Proton Therapy in the Veterans Health Administration Coverage Policy for Radiation Cancer Treatment

Executive Summary

Cancer is a significant health concern, especially among veterans who may have an increased risk due to environmental exposures during their service. It is imperative that Congress introduces a bill to support the inclusion of proton therapy in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) coverage policy for radiation cancer treatment. Proton therapy, a highly targeted and precise cancer treatment, has shown remarkable advantages in terms of reducing side effects, improving patient outcomes, and enhancing the quality of life during treatment and survivorship.

Cancer Statistics Among Veterans

- Approximately **50,000 cases of cancer are reported annually in the VA Central Cancer Registry**.¹
- Studies have shown that **veterans may have up to a 25% higher risk of lung cancer** than the general population due to exposure to environmental toxins, such as Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.²

The VHA, as the largest integrated healthcare system in the United States, has a responsibility to provide equitable access to advanced treatments like proton therapy for veterans. Unfortunately, the VHA's system for assessing evidence and delivering the best care to veterans is outdated. Notably, the VHA has not updated its guidelines for proton therapy since 2017, and those guidelines were not well-informed at the time. In contrast, leading cancer centers worldwide have published hundreds of articles over the past six years supporting the efficacy of proton therapy for specific cancers.

Proton Therapy Growth and Data

- Over the last six years, the number of proton therapy centers in the United States has increased from 25 to 42.
- Proton therapy centers report a steady rise in the number of patients treated, indicating growing demand and acceptance of its value for cancer patients.
- Multiple research studies have proven that proton therapy reduces debilitating side effects compared to traditional radiation.³

Aligning the VHA coverage guidelines with Medicare would ensure that veterans have access to the most advanced cancer treatments and can participate in clinical trials to support evidence development for future advances.



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Benefits of Proton Therapy

Proton therapy is an advanced radiation treatment that delivers high doses of radiation directly to tumors while sparing nearby healthy tissues and organs. This precision significantly reduces the risk of side effects and long-term damage to vital organs, resulting in improved patient outcomes and a higher quality of life during both treatment and survivorship.

Proton Therapy Outcomes

Proton therapy delivers high doses of radiation directly to tumors, sparing nearby healthy tissues and organs. The accuracy of this treatment reduces the risk of side effects and long-term damage to vital organs, resulting in improved patient outcomes and a higher quality of life during treatment and survivorship.

Targeted cancer treatments allow patients to resume their careers, engage with their families, and pursue their goals more quickly. **Proton therapy can offset overall treatment costs** by reducing the short and long-term costs caused by adverse side effects. With fewer adverse events and hospitalizations, proton therapy can reduce patient financial toxicity by reducing out-of-pocket costs associated with side effects and loss of income for veterans.

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Supporting Evidence

Prominent cancer centers, including National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated comprehensive cancer centers and National Comprehensive Care Network (NCCN) members, routinely utilize proton beam therapy as a treatment for multiple types of cancer. Multi-institutional research conducted by these centers consistently demonstrates that proton therapy yields improved outcomes for cancer patients across various disease sites.

Prominent Institutions and Proton Therapy

Prominent cancer centers, including National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated comprehensive cancer centers and National Comprehensive Care Network (NCCN) members, utilize proton beam therapy as a treatment for multiple types of cancer. Multi-institutional research conducted by these centers demonstrates that proton therapy improves outcomes for cancer patients across multiple disease sites.⁴ **Over 75% of National Comprehensive Cancer Network centers provide the option of proton therapy for their patients or plan to incorporate proton therapy into their cancer programs.**



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Cancer Moonshot Initiative

In alignment with the objectives of the Cancer Moonshot Initiative, advanced treatments such as proton therapy offer oncologists a broader array of options to select the most suitable treatment for cancer patients. This not only reduces mortality rates but also mitigates debilitating side effects, playing a pivotal role in achieving the goals of the Cancer Moonshot Initiative.

Importance for Veterans

The VHA serves millions of enrolled veterans each year, but it falls behind Medicare in providing access to advanced cancer treatments like proton therapy. Annually, nearly 50,000 cases of cancer are reported in the VA Central Cancer Registry. Nevertheless, according to the National Association for Proton Therapy's (NAPT) annual survey, **less than 250 veterans treated by the VHA received proton therapy in 2022.**

Disparities in Cancer Incidence

- Studies have shown that **Black and Hispanic veterans may face higher rates of cancer incidence** and mortality compared to their non-Hispanic white counterparts.
- Veterans from lower-income backgrounds or those without private insurance coverage may also encounter barriers to accessing advanced cancer treatments.

Veterans may have a higher incidence of cancer due to exposure to environmental toxins during their service. It is essential to provide veterans with equitable access to advanced treatments like proton therapy and the opportunity to participate in clinical trials to drive future advancements.

Equitable Access and Coverage Guidelines

Disparities in access to healthcare services exist across different regions of the United States, and some veterans may have limited access to specialized cancer treatment facilities, including those offering advanced therapies like proton therapy. Health disparities based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status also persist within the veteran population.⁵

To ensure that veterans receive the same level of access to advanced cancer treatments as Medicare beneficiaries, the VHA should align its coverage guidelines with Medicare. This alignment will empower veterans to benefit from the latest advancements in cancer treatment, including proton therapy, thereby reducing side effects, hospitalizations, secondary cancers, and disparities in care.

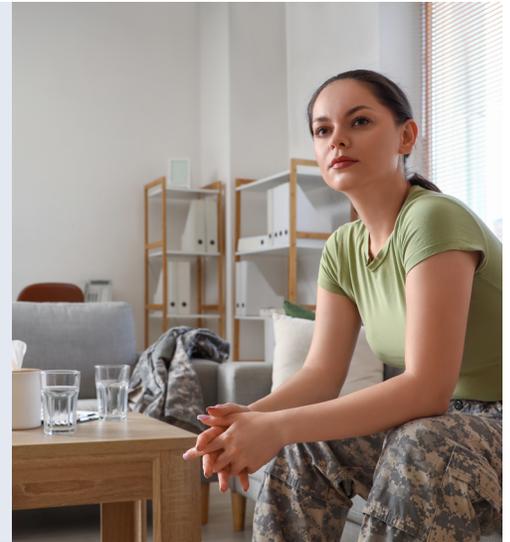


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Conclusion

Introducing a bill that supports the inclusion of proton therapy in the VHA coverage policy for radiation cancer treatment is a crucial step toward improving the lives of veterans. Proton therapy's precision, reduced side effects, and enhanced outcomes make it an ideal option for veterans who have made significant sacrifices for the nation. Providing equitable access to advanced treatments like proton therapy not only supports veterans' well-being but also ensures they have the best possible outcome when faced with a cancer diagnosis. Congress should act swiftly to prioritize the health and well-being of our veterans by endorsing the inclusion of proton therapy in the VHA's coverage policy for radiation cancer treatment.



- 1 U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2021). Spotlight on Cancer Research. Health Services Research & Development, <https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/news/feature/cancer-1021.cfm>
- 2 Washington DL (2022). National Veteran Health Equity Report 2021. Focus on Veterans Health Administration Patient Experience and Health Care Quality. Washington, DC: VHA Office of Health Equity, https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/NVHER_2021_Report_508_Conformant.pdf
- 3 JAMA Oncology (February 2020). Comparative Effectiveness of Proton vs Photon Therapy as Part of Concurrent Chemoradiotherapy for Locally Advanced Cancer. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31876914/>
- 4 For a list of NAPT-member proton centers, please see <http://proton-therapy.org>
- 5 International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (March 2021). Racial and Ethnic Disparities in U.S. Veteran Health Characteristics. Massachusetts Veterans Epidemiology Research and Information Center (MAVERIC): VA Boston Healthcare System, Boston, MA. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7967786/>

The National Association for Proton Therapy (NAPT) and its members support cancer research and treatment innovation and are committed to raising awareness about the value of proton therapy among policymakers, insurers, caregivers and patients to ensure that this advanced treatment modality is affordable and available in communities across the country.

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