



# FACT SHEET

## Depleted Uranium

The following information will help you to become familiar with Depleted Uranium in the Balkans and how it relates to your health

*The published scientific articles on Depleted Uranium report no adverse health effects from exposure to inhaled or ingested depleted uranium at levels found in the Balkans.*

### **WHAT IS DEPLETED URANIUM?**

Depleted Uranium (DU) is a dense, slightly radioactive heavy metal used by the United States and other countries in making ammunition, armor and other materials. Because of its density and self-sharpening qualities, DU is an excellent material for making armor and armor piercing weapons.

### **WHERE IS DU FOUND?**

Uranium is part of our natural environment. DU is a product of the process that converts natural uranium into the enriched form that is used for nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. Depleted uranium has 40% less radioactivity than natural uranium.

The first time DU munitions were used in combat was in Operation Desert Storm. DU munitions were also used in the Balkans. In certain areas where fighting took place, there may be DU fragments and particles in the soil and dust on pieces of battlefield equipment that were hit with DU munitions.

### **HOW DOES DU ENTER THE BODY?**

The DU in the Balkans is from spent munitions. As you learned in Depleted Uranium Awareness Training, DU can be inhaled, ingested or even enter the body through cuts or abrasions on the skin. However, if you exercise proper field sanitation techniques, you will be protected. That is why you were taught to leave spent munitions alone and to notify your chain of command. As long as you do not handle these expended munitions, and wash your hands you greatly reduce the possibility that DU can enter your body. Handling intact ammunition is safe.

### **ARE THERE POTENTIAL HEALTH EFFECTS FROM EXPOSURE TO DU IN THE BALKANS?**

Highly unlikely! Since most of the DU ammunition fired in the Balkans is located well below the ground, your potential for exposure to DU is extremely unlikely. Numerous studies of individuals who either inhaled

particles of DU or have DU fragments embedded in their wounds have shown no adverse health effects from their exposure. Potential exposures to DU in the Balkans are much lower than those noted in previous studies.

The possible health effects from extensive exposure of DU would be the result of it being a heavy metal, similar to lead. The kidney is the organ that is most often affected by heavy metals. Very high doses of heavy metals damage the kidney tubules and can reduce kidney's ability to filter blood. Although DU is slightly radioactive, there is very little potential that its radioactivity will affect your health.

If DU is inhaled, ingested or absorbed through a break in the skin, very little of it ever reaches the kidney. It is normally exhaled, excreted or washed away during wound cleaning.

### **IF DU MUNITIONS HAVE BEEN USED IN YOUR AREA, WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF?**

Although the potential that DU will affect your health is very low, as an added measure of safety, you can further protect yourself by simply practicing what you were taught in your Depleted Uranium Awareness Training,

- As with all battlefield debris-do not touch or move the object. This protects you not only from DU, but also from unexploded ordnance.
- Notify authorities of the location of any debris.
- Exercise standard field hygiene, to include washing your hands and face.
- Remember, no additional protective measures are required for handling unfired DU munitions other than those required for all munitions.

For more information please go to: [chppm-www.apgea.army.mil](http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil)

References:

1. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry., US Public Health Service. 1990. Toxicologic Profile for Uranium. [www.atsdr.cdc.gov](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov)
2. A Review of the Scientific Literature as it Pertains to Gulf War Illnesses: Vol 7 "Depleted Uranium," 15 April, 1999. [www.gulflink.osd.mil](http://www.gulflink.osd.mil)
3. GTA 3-4-1A, Depleted Uranium Awareness, 1 July 1999 [www.wood.army.mil/usacmls](http://www.wood.army.mil/usacmls)

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