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### 4,000 U.S. non-combat evacuations in Iraq

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 3 (UPI) -- Nearly 4,000 U.S. troops have been medically evacuated from Operation Iraqi Freedom for non-combat reasons -- with more than one in five of those for psychiatric or neurological problems, according to Pentagon data.

A total of 3,915 evacuations from the region have been for non-combat medical problems. A combination of what the Pentagon is calling evacuations for "psychiatric" and "neurological" problems make up 22 percent of the total, with 478 and 387 evacuations, respectively.

Another 544 evacuations have been for "general surgery," 290 for gynecological reasons and 118 for orthopedic problems.

Army Surgeon General spokeswoman Virginia Stephanakis, who supplied the data, said on Friday that she had few details, but that the Pentagon had not detected any "red flags" indicating troubling or unexpected health patterns.

Some of the evacuations were for accidental injuries, she said, adding that orthopedic, or bone, problems might reflect vehicle accidents.

A leading veterans' group said the data needed to be studied to understand the true cost of the war and potential health hazards.

"Clearly there is more detail that needs to be given about the nature and causes of these evacuations," said Steve Robinson, executive director of the National Gulf War Resource Center.

In August, the Pentagon announced an investigation into a mysterious pneumonia that killed two soldiers and made 17 others so sick they needed ventilators to breathe. The probe is focusing on the role of smoking, those officials said.

An investigation by United Press International found that 17 soldiers in Operation Iraqi Freedom have died from sudden illnesses, including three with fluid in the lungs, eight who suddenly collapsed and three who were found dead in their cots.

Robinson questioned whether any of the psychiatric or neurological problems might be related to Lariam, a common anti-malaria drug given to many soldiers in the region. Lariam's FDA-approved product label warns of reports of hallucinations, seizures, paranoia, aggression, delusions and suicide.

Published reports this summer said the military was investigating several suspected suicides. UPI found that at least 15 service members in Operation Iraqi Freedom have died from what were described as non-combat gunshot wounds, the latest on Sept. 30.

The Pentagon says it sometimes uses Lariam, known generically as mefloquine, over other anti-malaria drugs because side effects are rare and must be weighed against the risk of getting malaria.

A total of 318 soldiers have died in Operation Iraqi Freedom since March 20, according to the Pentagon. Another 1,380 soldiers have been wounded in action as of Oct. 1.

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