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Suicidal ideation among male UK military personnel who sustained a physical combat injury on deployment in Afghanistan and the mediating role of leaving service: The ADVANCE cohort study.

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What is the ADVANCE Study?

The ADVANCE Study investigates the physical and psycho-social outcomes of combat casualties in the long-term. The study has 1,145 participants who served in the Afghanistan conflict of 2002-2014. Half of the cohort sustained serious physical combat injuries, and the other half are demographically similar personnel who sustained no such injuries (the comparison group). The participants will attend six study visits over a 20-year period.

What does this piece of ADVANCE research look at?

Suicidal ideation includes thoughts, ideas or ruminations about the possibility of ending one's life and may precede suicide behaviours or attempts. Understanding whether combat injury is associated with higher rates of suicidal ideation will help service providers, policy makers and researchers ensure we are doing all we can for injured serving personnel and veterans to reduce the risk of future suicidal-related behaviours.

What were the findings?

15.3% of those who sustained serious physical combat injuries reported suicidal ideation in the past two weeks compared to 11.9% in the comparison group. Our findings suggest that there whilst there is increased risk of suicidal ideation amongst those that sustained serious physical combat injuries, the type of injury is important to consider. Those who sustained amputation injuries had similar rates of suicidal ideation to the comparison group (8.5%), whereas those who sustained non-amputation injuries reported the highest rates (17.6%).



Statistical analysis of the cohort suggests that leaving service is also an important factor to consider, as veterans in both the injured and comparison groups were considerably more likely to report suicidal ideation than their still-serving peers. Indeed, a surprising finding of the study was that veterans who sustained no serious physical combat injuries reported the highest rates of suicidal ideation (28.9%) compared to veterans who sustained amputation injuries (8.1%) and non-amputation injuries (21.4%).

What do the findings mean?

Sustaining a serious physical combat injury is associated with increased likelihood of reporting suicidal ideation. However, it is clear that this is not the only cause of suicidal ideation that personnel who deployed to Afghanistan might experience, since a considerable number of veterans who did not sustain serious physical combat injuries also experienced suicidal ideation. Psychological health (e.g. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) or exposure to certain combat experiences may be responsible for the increase in suicidal ideation.

Additionally, leaving service itself might be a risk factor, with previous research reporting that leaving service is associated with reduced involvement in the military community and lower social support as a result, and difficulties transitioning from military to civilian life surrounding the loss of group identity. Further research is needed to assess why some individuals appear to be at an increased risk, such as veterans and those with non-amputation related physical combat injuries, and some are at lower risk, such as those with amputation related physical combat injuries.