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At War

Notes From the Front Lines

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A War Injury With a Big Impact: The Plain Old Headache

By JAMES DAO

Ask anyone about the signature wounds of the current wars and the list is likely to include lost limbs, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress, back strains and knee pains. But a new study from Johns Hopkins University says the plain old headache has been a leading cause of attrition in units deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The study, published in *Cephalalgia*, the journal of the [International Headache Society](#), found that neurological illness was among the top three causes of noncombat related evacuations from the war zones, and that headaches were the most common neurological complaint for those evacuees.

The study found that the most common diagnoses were for post-concussive headaches, 34 percent; migraines, 30 percent; and tension, 11 percent. The researchers also found that a smaller but still significant number of the headaches were caused by helmets, which weigh about 3 pounds and put pressure on the occipital nerve in the back of the head.

“Everyone who goes on patrol wears a Kevlar helmet,” said the study leader, Dr. Steven P. Cohen, an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and director of chronic pain research at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. “They are heavy. They are hard to wear. But if you get a headache from your helmet, you still must wear it.”

The researchers reviewed the records of 985 military personnel who were medically evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan between 2004 and 2009 with a primary diagnosis of headache. Of those, two out of three did not return to duty.

Only one in five of those troops with headaches associated with physical trauma returned to duty. But nearly half of those with tension headaches were able to go back to work in theater, the study found.

The researchers said that the 33 percent return-to-duty rate for personnel evacuated with headaches “is one of the lowest among all injury types.” They called for better guidelines for managing headaches and a new design for helmets to reduce strain on the occipital nerve.