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Troop stress disorders up 50%

More combat, better records cited for rise

By Pauline Jelinek

Associated Press

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Washington — The number of troops with new cases of post-traumatic stress disorder jumped by roughly 50 percent in 2007 amid the military buildup in Iraq and increased violence there and in Afghanistan.

Records show roughly 40,000 troops have been diagnosed with the illness, also known as PTSD, since 2003. Officials believe that many more are likely keeping their illness a secret.

"I don't think right now we ... have good numbers," Army Surgeon General Eric Schoomaker said Tuesday.

Defense officials had not previously disclosed the number of PTSD cases from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Army statistics showed there were nearly 14,000 newly diagnosed cases across the services in 2007 compared with more than 9,500 new cases the previous year and 1,632 in 2003.

Schoomaker attributed the big rise over the years partly to the fact that officials started an electronic record system in 2004 that captures more information, and to the fact that the people keeping records are now more knowledgeable about the illness.

He also blamed increased exposure of troops to combat.

Factors increasing troop exposure to combat in 2007 included President Bush's troop buildup and the fact that 2007 was the most violent year in both conflicts.

More troops also were serving their second, third or fourth tours of duty — a factor mental health experts say dramatically increases stress. And in order to supply enough forces for the buildup, officials also extended tour lengths to 15 months from 12, another factor that caused extra emotional strain.

Officials have been encouraging troops to get help even if it means they go to civilian therapists and don't report it to the military.

"We're trying very hard to encourage soldiers and families to seek care and to not have them feel in any way, shape or form that we're looking over their shoulder or that we're invading their privacy," Schoomaker told a

group of defense writers.

The accounting of diagnosed cases released Tuesday shows those hardest hit last year were Marines and Army personnel, the two ground forces bearing the brunt of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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