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Military Issues New Restrictions for Recruits

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | September 11, 2025

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The Department of Defense (DoD) has tightened military recruitment standards, restricting enlistment for applicants with serious conditions like congestive heart failure and active schizophrenia treatment
- Heart failure hospitalizations among young adults (18 to 44 years old) increased 23% from 1999 to 2019, driven by rising obesity, metabolic syndrome, pollution exposure, and substance abuse
- Mental health disorders are surging among youth aged 12 to 25 years old, with one-third experiencing anxiety or depression severe enough to interfere with daily functioning
- Only 23% of military recruits in 2024 could enlist without medical waivers, indicating widespread health problems among potential soldiers affecting national security readiness
- Improving cellular health by eliminating processed foods, consuming healthy carbs, reducing EMF exposure, getting proper sunlight, and supporting gut microbiome can help reverse declining youth health

According to statistics, most of the soldiers recruited by the Department of Defense (DoD) tend to be between 17 and 21 years old.[1] This age bracket has traditionally been considered the ideal due to assumptions about peak physical health — but this is no longer the case. The health of the youth nowadays is steadily declining, putting the combat readiness of the U.S. military in danger. This has led to the DoD tightening recruitment standards.

Military Updates Health Standards for New Recruits

In a recent memo released last July 11, 2025, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced new recruitment standards designed to restrict enlistment among applicants with significant health problems.[2,3]

- **An overview of restricted conditions —** The policy specifically excludes applicants diagnosed with congestive heart failure, which is a severe condition wherein the heart struggles to pump blood effectively, causing fatigue, shortness of breath, and fluid accumulation. As for mental health restrictions, the announcement said that applicants who have ongoing treatment for schizophrenia and recent suicide attempts are "ineligible for medical accession waivers."

  The new guidelines are a response to the rising number of young adults who suffer from these debilitating conditions, which can affect the readiness and safety of soldiers in demanding situations.

- **Healthy soldiers are a national security priority —** According to Hegseth, the change is implemented to allow future soldiers to carry out orders at the harshest situations while being at the top of their physical and mental health. He says, "Severe underlying medical conditions introduce significant risks on the battlefield and threaten not only mission priorities, but also the health and safety of the affected individual and their fellow Service members."[4]

- **New recruits are not healthy anymore —** According to The Epoch Times, around 13% to 16% of applicants were rejected for failing to meet the standards set by the DoD. Furthermore, only 23% of recruits in 2024 were able to enlist without a medical waiver. This means that the rest of the soldiers are diagnosed with a physical or mental condition.

- **Current list of conditions ineligible for waivers —** Aside from heart failure, applicants with these conditions will not be allowed to join the military:

  - Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis

    - Current chronic supplemental oxygen use
    - Current congestive heart failure
    - Current epilepsy
    - Current treatment for schizophrenia
    - History of cystic fibrosis
    - History of receiving a solid organ transplant
    - History of paraphilic disorders, or disorders involving abnormal sexual interests or behaviors
    - Multiple sclerosis
    - Osteogenesis Imperfecta, or brittle bone disease
    - Suicidal attempt within the previous 12 months
    - Thoughts or plans of killing another person within the previous 12 months
    - Trisomy 21, or Down syndrome
- **Conditions that can be waivered —** In addition to the updated list of ineligible waivers, Hegseth also released the list of conditions that can be exempted:
    - Current central nervous system shunts
    - Current ostomy
    - Eye missing or lack of vision in at least one eye
    - Foot missing
    - Hand missing, or bony portion of hand missing, excepting digits
    - History of chronic hepatic failure

- History of chronic kidney disease requiring dialysis
- History of corneal transplant
- History of disorders with psychotic features, including schizophrenic disorders
- History of myocardial infarction, or heart attacks
- History of neurodegenerative disorders, such as disorders affecting the spinal cord
- History of scleroderma, a disease that features tight skin and tissue
- Having an implanted pacemaker or defibrillator

Hegseth's announcement reflects broader societal health trends among potential recruits who can impact military readiness should they be allowed to enlist. As more young people struggle with conditions traditionally affecting older generations, ensuring military personnel having robust health and mental resilience becomes a pressing priority. The takeaway here is clear — focusing on your health is essential if you're considering enlisting in any branch of the military.

Heart Failure Is Surging Among Young Adults — Here's Why

In a study published in the World Journal of Cardiology, researchers investigated the alarming rise in heart failure cases among younger adults, specifically those between 18 and 44 years old. At first, they started with 632 studies, whittling it down to 89 that were able to meet their methodology criteria.[5]

- **The findings reveal a clear and disturbing pattern —** Hospitalizations for heart failure among adults aged 18 to 44 years old increased significantly — 23% of them were diagnosed between 1999 to 2019. This rise also corresponds with growing rates of obesity, diabetes, drug misuse, and environmental pollution exposure among younger populations.

- **Obesity and metabolic syndrome are driving factors —** Digging deeper into the findings, obesity-related metabolic syndrome (MetS) was the most powerful factor driving the increase in heart failure:[6]

  > *"MetS, influenced by excessive consumption of high-calorie foods, physical inactivity, hypertension (HTN), hyperglycemia, dyslipidemia, and central obesity, is being diagnosed more frequently in adolescents and young adults, particularly in high-income countries.*
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  > *This growing trend substantially raises the likelihood of HF in this demographic. Additionally, MetS is strongly associated with an elevated risk of Type 2 diabetes (T2D), CVD, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, chronic kidney disease, and various cancers."*

- **Pollution emerged as another major risk factor —** The study cited exposure to fine particulate matter, which are tiny particles found in polluted air that you inhale deep into your lungs. Over time, these pollutants irritate and damage the lining of your blood vessels and heart:[7]

  > *"Oxides of nitrogen (NO2) and particulate matter smaller (PM2.5) than 2.5 microns are particularly concerning as they can easily reach the lungs and bloodstream. Long-term exposure to these pollutants causes inflammation and oxidative stress, affects endothelial function, and ultimately is closely linked to heart failure (HF) pathophysiology."*

- **Substance abuse causes cardiovascular damage among younger adults —** Drugs such as cocaine and amphetamines cause dramatic surges in heart rate and blood pressure, forcing the heart to work much harder than normal. The repeated strain eventually leads to structural damage in the heart muscle — known medically as myocardial remodeling[8] — which reduces the heart's ability to function properly.

- **There is a rise in autoimmune disorders —** These include conditions like lupus or rheumatoid arthritis, characterized by the body's immune system mistakenly attacking healthy tissue, including cardiac muscle[9] itself.

- **Heart failure is also inherited —** Genetics also played a substantial role. Mutations in specific genes, such as titin and Lamin A/C (LMNA) naturally increase the risk of heart failure. Although these genetic mutations don't guarantee heart failure on their own, their presence dramatically magnifies the damaging effects of lifestyle and environmental factors.

  In other words, if you have these genetic predispositions, unhealthy lifestyle choices or environmental exposures significantly accelerate the onset of heart failure.

- **Inflammation is at the center of heart failure —** The mentioned factors primarily impact your heart by causing inflammation and oxidative stress. Chronic inflammation from obesity or pollution exposure directly injures the cells lining your heart and blood vessels, creating scar tissue and stiffness that hinder proper function. Similarly, oxidative stress further weakens and damages heart cells, reducing their ability to generate the energy required for strong contractions.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing heart health proactively, especially at a young age. By recognizing and reversing key factors like obesity, pollution exposure, substance abuse, and controlling underlying autoimmune conditions early, you significantly reduce your risk of developing heart failure in the prime of your life.

Mental Health Disorders Among the Youth Are Rising

A study published in Frontiers in Psychiatry examined the current mental state of young people around the world. The researchers focused specifically on adolescents and young adults aged 12 to 25 years old who are increasingly reporting mental health problems at rates never before documented.[10]

According to the researchers, young people are now facing significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to past generations, and these problems are not simply temporary issues but serious, lasting conditions. The authors reported that about one-third of the test population have experienced anxiety or depression symptoms significant enough to interfere severely with daily life, school performance, and social interactions.

- **Marginalized groups experience mental hardships the most —** The researchers highlighted that youth born into poverty have more mental health problems compared to those belonging in higher economic brackets:[11]

  > *"Adolescents in both lower-income and higher-income households reported more psychological distress compared to those in middle-income households …*
  >
  > *Data from the US suggest increasing rates of major depressive episode in adolescents between 2005 and 2017 across all income levels, although inequalities remained as those in the lowest income group experienced higher annual rates of major depressive episode than the highest income group."*

- **Schools need to step up mental health care —** To widen the scope of mental health services, the researchers suggest using technology, especially in schools and universities:[12]

  > *"Schools should implement mental health programs that include early identification and intervention services, as these can significantly improve student outcomes and address mental health challenges. Additionally, leveraging digital platforms to offer accessible resources, psychoeducation, peer support, and connections to mental health professionals can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression among young people."*

- **Integrate mental wellness into school lessons —** The researchers also suggest that an open discussion of mental health in an academic setting can help foster a positive environment:[13]

  > *"[I]ntegrating mental health education into school curricula helps to normalize discussions about mental health and provide students with tools for managing stress and emotional challenges. This may also include*

school-based behavioral interventions to minimize risk of bullying and peer rejection as well as substance abuse."

- **Early intervention helps immensely —** One of the most impactful findings from the study was how mental health dramatically improved when interventions were applied early and consistently. Young adults who received targeted mental health care are able to improve emotional stability:[14]

  "Integrated and enhanced primary care youth services offer comprehensive support, addressing a range of mental health issues before they become severe. The 'Integrated Behavioral Health in Primary Care' (IBHPC) model is an example, where behavioral health providers are embedded in primary care practices to offer immediate support and referrals.

  These services are designed to provide comprehensive, accessible, and coordinated care for young people, integrating mental health services into primary care settings."

- **A call to action for governments around the world —** One of the most important suggestions provided by the researchers is the importance of creating guidelines that improve the mental health of the youth:[15]

  "Political will is essential for enacting policies that deliver mental health equity, such as increased funding for mental health research proportional to its share of the burden of disease and its impact on society, implementation of school-based mental health programs, and the establishment of accessible mental health services.

  Political will is directly proportional in a democracy to the level of public activism and demand for reform, which needs to be energized and mobilized."

Optimal Cellular Health Is Key to Optimal Physical and Mental Health

Despite the numerous factors contributing to the decline of physical and mental health in the youth today, there are still ways to turn things around, namely focusing on improving cellular health. If you know someone who is considering enlisting in the army, share the following tips with them to maximize their chances of being accepted:

1. **Cut out vegetable oils and ultraprocessed foods —** Avoid consuming vegetable oils, such as soybean, corn, and sunflower oils. These oils contain high amounts of linoleic acid (LA) that rapidly oxidize, creating toxins that harm your cell's energy-producing mitochondria. By ditching these harmful oils, you'll significantly reduce cellular stress and inflammation, allowing your mitochondria to function at their best.

   I recommend limiting your intake to less than 5 grams per day, but if you can keep it below 2 grams per day, that's even better. To help you monitor your intake, download the upcoming Mercola Health Coach app. It contains a feature called the Seed Oil Sleuth, which can track consumption to a tenth of a gram.

2. **Tune out the marketing noise —** Your family also needs to break free from the 24/7 barrage of advertisements from junk food companies. If you're having difficulty breaking the habit of consuming ultraprocessed foods, read "Junk Food Ads Make Kids Eat More Even When No Food Is Shown." There, I provide tips that can help protect your children from long-term damage brought on by unhealthy food choices.

3. **Choose healthy fats to support your cellular health —** Once you've thrown out all ultraprocessed food from your pantry, it's time to switch to cook healthy, nutritious meals using grass fed butter, ghee, and beef tallow. These stable fats help protect your mitochondria without causing oxidative stress.

While healthy fats contribute to optimal health, there's a caveat — limit your total fat intake to less than 30% of your daily calories. If you go beyond this range, your body will switch to burning fat as energy, which isn't what you want. Remember that glucose is your body's preferred fuel.

4. **Eat the right amount of healthy carbohydrates —** Carbohydrates are your main source of glucose, which helps fuel your mitochondria. Aim for 200 to 250 grams of carbs, starting with whole fruits and white rice. Once your gut health is back on track, gradually add in root vegetables and other vegetables, legumes, and well-tolerated whole grains.

5. **Reduce your electromagnetic field (EMF) exposure —** Decrease your body's exposure to EMFs by limiting the time you spend using wireless devices, and by turning off your Wi-Fi when it's not needed.

   Consider doing a bit of remodeling around your house as well, such as creating low-EMF zones, particularly in the bedrooms. Doing this eases cellular stress and promotes stronger mitochondrial function. For additional tips on how to minimize EMF exposure, read "WiFried — Is Wireless Technology Dooming a Generation?"

6. **Get appropriate sunlight exposure —** Sunlight is one of the best ways to conveniently support your cellular health as it enhances your mitochondria's energy production. However, it's important that you limit your exposure, as the LA you've been eating has likely embedded into your skin. When sunlight hits these stored fats, it metabolizes, which leads to inflammation, DNA damage, and sunburn.

   To help displace LA from your skin faster, boost your intake of C15:0 (pentadecanoic acid) fat, found primarily in dairy products. Most people get only about 10 to 200 milligrams per day. I personally take 2 grams daily. At that level, research suggests your keratinocytes — the skin cells in your outermost layer — may start incorporating C15:0 in place of LA.

   For an in-depth explanation into the science behind this, read "The Fast-Track Path to Clearing Vegetable Oils from Your Skin."

7. **Boost your gut health —** Research has shown that your gut microbiome and mental health are inextricably linked. Thus, if you've been eating plenty of ultraprocessed foods, you've likely been feeling down more often.

   To repair your gut microbiome, I recommend making your own fermented foods at home to ensure you're getting a regular influx of beneficial bacteria. Easy options you can do at home include yogurt, kefir, and sauerkraut.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About the Physical and Mental Health of the Youth Today

Q: Why has the military tightened health standards for new recruits?

A: The Department of Defense (DoD) has tightened its recruitment standards due to declining health among young adults, especially rising rates of heart failure and mental illnesses, threatening combat readiness and soldiers' safety.

Q: What specific health conditions now disqualify applicants from military service without a waiver?

A: Conditions that completely prevent enlistment — without exceptions — include congestive heart failure, active schizophrenia treatment, epilepsy, recent suicide attempts, Down syndrome, brittle bone disease, and history of solid organ transplants.

Q: What's causing the surge in heart failure among young adults?

A: The main drivers are obesity-related metabolic syndrome, environmental pollution, substance abuse, autoimmune disorders, and genetic factors. These issues trigger chronic inflammation and stress the heart, leading to early-onset

heart failure.

Q: How widespread are mental health issues among adolescents and young adults?

A: Around one-third of young people aged 12 to 25 years old experience severe anxiety or depression symptoms that significantly disrupt their daily lives, school performance, and social interactions. Those from marginalized or low-income backgrounds face the highest risks.

Q: What practical steps can young people take to improve health?

A: To improve your cellular and overall health, eliminate vegetable oils and ultraprocessed foods, reduce exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs), consume healthy carbs, incorporate healthy fats like grass fed butter, ensure appropriate sunlight exposure, and regularly consume probiotics and fermented foods to boost gut health.

Sources and References

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