Mental health disorders caused more hospitalizations among U.S. troops in 2009 than any other reason according to medical data released recently by the Pentagon. This historic high reflects the growing toll of nearly nine years of war.

Last year was the first in which hospitalizations for mental disorders outpaced those for injuries or pregnancies in the 15 years of tracking by the Pentagon's Medical Surveillance Monthly report.

Hospitalizations for mental disorders have increased significantly among troops since 2005, said Lt. Gen. Eric Schoomaker, surgeon general for the Army. "War is difficult. It takes a toll," he said.

Mental health treatment expenses are helping drive up the overall cost of military health care, USA TODAY reported last month. Last week, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a speech that "health care costs are eating the Defense Department alive." Schoomaker said the Army's increased attention to mental health issues is another reason for the rise in hospital admittances.

In 2009, there were 17,538 hospitalizations for mental health issues throughout the military, the study shows. That compares with 17,354 for pregnancy and childbirth reasons, and 11,156 for injuries and battle wounds.

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