

Many soldiers not fit for combat for medical, other reasons

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Nearly 90,000 soldiers are either unfit for combat with health restrictions or are otherwise unavailable for combat, according to data released to USA TODAY.

While the Army says it can fill combat brigades heading to Afghanistan with healthy soldiers — some rushed in at the last minute as units head overseas — the growing list of ill, injured or wounded is making the job tougher, say military officials.

"The problem of a growing population of not-medically-ready soldiers has begun to erode the readiness of the Army," the service's surgeon general, Lt. Gen. Eric Schoomaker, recently said at a military conference in Washington, D.C.

Army data show record numbers of soldiers either on the sick list, with limited-duty issues, or unfit and waiting months to receive their medical retirement. Plans are in place to reduce the Army by nearly 50,000 soldiers in coming years, further diminishing the pool of healthy GIs, according to a spokesman for the House Armed Services Committee.

"With larger numbers of non-deployable soldiers within a smaller force, the Army will continue to struggle to have sufficient manpower to adequately meet all mission requirements," Claude Chafin says.

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