

# Health Trends



A Quarterly Newsletter for the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System ■ VISN 18

## Managing Stress

If you're having difficulty coping with life's demands, we call this "stress." A life without some stress would be boring. Most of us like some challenges, but too much stress creates problems.

People who are overly stressed report difficulty concentrating, feelings of worry and fear, a sense that the body is wound up (for example, tense muscles, sweaty palms, and a pounding heart), irritability with others, and exhaustion. Too much stress over a long period of time can put your health at risk.

If you or someone you know is in an emotional crisis, call The Veterans' Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and press 1 for Veterans.

### Stress Management Suggestions:

- **Physical Activity**—Take a brisk walk or engage in other physically demanding activities. This may reduce your stress. Regular physical activity is best.
- **Problem Solving**—Learn problem solving skills, as this can often improve your ability to cope. Your medical center may offer a class or information session on problem solving skills.
- **Relaxation Training**—Learn relaxation and mindfulness skills. These skills can help you manage the arousal associated with stress. There's some evidence that daily relaxation may protect you from at least some of the physical responses to stress. There are several self-help books on relaxation at libraries and bookstores, and your medical center may offer relaxation or mindfulness training.
- **Expression**—Speak up in respectful ways. Sharing thoughts and feelings in an assertive and respectful manner can sometimes help buffer stress.
- **Time Management**—List what needs to get done, make plans for addressing issues, and stick to the plan. There are several self-help books on time management at libraries and bookstores.
- **Positive Thinking**—Stress is often associated with negative, self-critical thinking. Focus your attention on positive thoughts about yourself, favorite songs, poems, favorite prayers, or hobbies.
- **Pleasant Activities**—Often, you may be experiencing stress because you're not making time for fun in your life. Plan to have regular, enjoyable activities and see if this buffers your stress. ■



## What Is VetLink?

VetLink is a new check-in system provided by the VA Point of Service Program (VPS). VetLink allows Veterans and caregivers to manage their health information. With a swipe of a Veteran Identification Card (VIC) at a VetLink kiosk, patients can:

- Check in for scheduled appointments;
- Update their contact and insurance data; and
- View account balances.

Soon, patients will be able to enter their allergies and medications in VetLink. This information will help clinicians prevent dangerous drug side effects.

VetLink has been in use at four pilot sites across the nation. Teams at those sites are refining the system as it's being deployed across the nation.



VetLink kiosks support VA's strategic goals to:

- Increase Veteran satisfaction;
- Improve the quality and accessibility of health care;
- Improve internal customer satisfaction; and
- Improve emergency readiness by centralizing patient contact information. ■

## VA Publishes Social Media Policy

The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced the release of a policy directive regarding the secure use of Web-based collaboration and social media tools. "Veterans should have consistent and convenient access to reliable VA information real time using social media – whether on a smartphone or a computer," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "They also should be able to communicate directly with appropriate VA employees electronically."

"This isn't about using social media because it's cool or because it's a fad," said VA Director of Online Communications Brandon Friedman. "It's about getting the right information to the right Veteran at the right time. This policy sets us on a path toward changing how we talk – and listen – to Vets."

VA began launching social media sites in 2009 and now has more than 100 Facebook pages, more than 50 Twitter feeds, two blogs, a YouTube channel, and a Flickr page. VA's Facebook pages have a combined subscribership of over 293,000 fans – with the Department's main page reaching over 138,000.

On Twitter, VA has a combined followership of over 53,000, with the Department's main feed reaching over 22,000. By year end, the Department expects to have an active Facebook page and Twitter feed for all 152 VA Medical Centers.

### VA's Main Social Media Sites

- [blogs.va.gov](http://blogs.va.gov)
- [www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs](http://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs)

- [twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs](https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs)
- [www.youtube.com/user/DeptVetAffairs](https://www.youtube.com/user/DeptVetAffairs)
- [www.flickr.com/photos/VeteransAffairs](https://www.flickr.com/photos/VeteransAffairs)

### Regional Facebook Sites



All seven Medical Centers within VISN 18 have active Facebook pages. To access the one in your

area, visit your center's Website (address shown on the back page of this issue inside the box in the upper left hand corner), then scroll to the bottom of the home page and click on the Facebook icon, as shown above. The VA's Facebook pages are excellent resources in many ways. You'll find lots of information on a broad range of topics, such as VA benefits, health tips, coming events, career opportunities, clinic locations, etc. You can also interact by leaving your own comments and requests.

If you have your own Facebook account, you can access the VA Facebook pages directly by entering one of the following sites:

- Amarillo VA Health Care System
- Phoenix VA Health Care System
- West Texas VA Health Care System
- New Mexico VA Health Care System
- Northern Arizona VA Health Care System
- El Paso VA Health Care System
- Southern Arizona VA Health Care System ■

## Flu Season Has Arrived

The 2011-12 flu season is upon us, which means it's time for your annual vaccination. The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious flu complications.

Each year, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration selects the appropriate ingredients for the vaccine, based on studies conducted around the world. This year's vaccine offers protection from three influenza viruses. Free flu shots are available at your local VA facility

### Every year in the United States, on average:

- 5 to 20 percent of the population get the flu;
- more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications;
- about 36,000 people die from flu.

Flu spreads very easily from person to person. Individuals with chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes, asthma or heart disease, are particularly at risk of the influenza infection, as are people in nursing, convalescent or other institutional settings. People 50 years of age or older are also urged to get the influenza vaccination annually.

Anyone who wants to decrease the risk for catching the flu should get a flu shot. The only exceptions are if you are allergic to eggs, or have had a serious allergic reaction to a previous flu shot.



Veterans who develop flu-like symptoms such as fever, cough and/or sore throat should stay home from work or school; get lots of rest, drink plenty of liquids, avoid using alcohol and tobacco; and take over-the-counter medications to relieve flu symptoms. Call 911 if you develop difficulty breathing, chest pain or pressure, dizziness, confusion or severe vomiting.

For more information about flu vaccinations, please contact the VA facility in your area.

**Reminder:** Please notify your health care provider if you receive a flu vaccination from another health care provider outside the VA. ■

## VA Streamlines Online Renewal Applications

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has automated its online Health Benefits Renewal (10-10EZR) form as part of its ongoing effort to streamline access to benefits.

“This action dramatically reduces the time it will take for enrolled Veterans to submit updates to their demographic information and further reduces access barriers to needed care for Veterans,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki.

Previously, Veterans filling out the online 10-10EZR were required to print a copy, sign it and send it to their local medical center before updates to their personal, insurance or financial information could occur. Veterans may now submit these updates online.

For additional information, go to [www.va.gov/healtheligibility](http://www.va.gov/healtheligibility) or call VA's toll-free number at 1-877-222-VETS (8387). The online form is available at [www.1010ez.med.va.gov/sec/vha/1010ez/Form/1010ezr.pdf](http://www.1010ez.med.va.gov/sec/vha/1010ez/Form/1010ezr.pdf). ■

## Managing the Stress of Returning to College

For many Veterans, readjusting to civilian life can be stressful. Returning to academic life frequently compounds that stress. As a result, many Veterans become frustrated and don't continue their educations. However, a collaborative program between the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS), University of Arizona (UofA) and the Student Veterans of America (SVA) UofA Chapter are helping Veterans reduce the stress of adjusting to campus life.

This collaborative program at the university provides VA counseling on campus. It assists with questions regarding GI Bill benefits, tutoring, the Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) curriculum, resource center, and VETS office. Veterans are also given priority registration to assure that they get the courses they need in a timely manner. This also ensures

they can complete the education in the allotted time required by the G.I. Bill.

According to Glen Lacroix, President of the UofA SVA, "The VETS office located on campus is a place for Veterans to know that if they have any questions related to classes, financial aid or student resources, we are here to answer their questions." He added: "Many Veterans who have come through the VETS office have gone on to graduate."

Dr. Michael Marks, Lead Psychologist at SAVAHCS stated that, "More often than not, it's the stress of readjusting to the demands of academic life that creates problems for returning Veterans, not their intelligence or motivation."

The SERV program at the UofA boasts a 90 percent retention rate and continues to assist Veterans in coping with the stresses of adjusting to college life. ■



*Dr. Michael Marks  
Lead Psychologist and PCT  
Leader going over SERV  
class assignments with his  
University of Arizona class*

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**Winter 2012**  
If you are a veteran who is currently smoking and would like to learn ways to stop this habit, help is available through the Tucson VA Health Care System. Please contact your primary care provider and request a consultation to the Smoking Cessation Program.  
Health Trends is designed to provide general health and wellness information and news about services provided by VSN 18. Health Trends is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your healthcare provider.  
**To Change Your Address**  
Contact Eligibility and Enrollment  
Southern Arizona VA Health Care System  
520-629-4952 or 1-800-470-8262, Option 1, then 4952  
**Patient Concerns or Issues**  
Please contact our Patient Representatives at  
520-629-4933 or 520-792-1450, ext. 6960  
www.tucson.va.gov