

Health Trends



A Quarterly Newsletter for the El Paso VA Health Care System ■ VISN 18

Getting and Staying Active

No matter what your age or body type, you can benefit from even small amounts of activity. Physical activity is safe for almost everyone, and the health benefits far outweigh the risks. Regular physical activity decreases the risk for developing depression, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke, and some kinds of cancer.

If you don't have a chronic condition (such as diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis) or symptoms (e.g., chest pain or pressure, dizziness, or joint pain) you don't need to talk to a health care provider before becoming more active. However, if you have a concern, talk with your health care team about the types and amounts of activity that are best for you.

Start at a comfortable level. Once this begins to seem easy, add a little more activity each time. Then try doing it more often. Even if you're out of shape or haven't been active in a long time, you can begin activity safely.

For important health benefits, do at least 2½ hours each week of moderate-intensity, or 1¼ hours a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity, or a combination of both. The former includes things like walking fast, dancing, and raking leaves. The latter includes things like jogging, jumping rope, swimming laps, or riding a bike uphill.

Aerobic activity (also called endurance activity) is when you move your body's

large muscles in a rhythmic manner for a sustained period of time and your heart beats faster than usual.

Muscle strengthening activity causes your body's muscles to work or hold against an applied force or weight. This includes resistance training and lifting weights. Strengthening activities should be performed on at least two non-consecutive days each week and should target all the major muscle groups: legs, hips, back, chest, abdomen, shoulders, and arms.

Stretching can increase flexibility, improve joint range of motion, improve circulation, and relieve stress. Generally, it's best to combine stretching with physical activity. For those who are not active regularly, stretching at least three times per week to maintain flexibility is a good starting point. ■



Rabies Alert for OEF/OIF/OND Veterans

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that leads to a fatal brain infection. It is transmitted from infected animals to people through bites and exposure to saliva. Rabies is preventable if you are vaccinated before you get sick.

Why is this important for Veterans?

A high percent of dogs in Afghanistan and Iraq, even though they may appear healthy, are infected with rabies. OEF/OIF/OND Veterans who were deployed in the previous 18 months, and were bitten or had contact with the saliva from a warm-blooded animal such as a dog, cat, bat, fox, skunk, raccoon, mongoose or jackal could be at risk.

What should I do if I was bitten or exposed while deployed?

Get evaluated today! Discuss what happened and what, if any, treatment you received, with your VA provider. It is frequently impossible to know if the animal you had contact with had rabies. Because rabies is a very serious disease, we want to understand your specific case and discuss treatment options with you. ■

Volunteers Needed

Erma Bombeck once described them as: “the only human beings on the face of the earth who reflect this nation’s compassion, unselfish caring, patience, and just plain love for one another.” She was referring to volunteers, defined as those who “undertake or express a willingness to undertake a service.”

Nowhere is that better expressed than at our nation’s VA facilities, where volunteers play an important role in helping to serve our Veterans. The program is coordinated by the Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS), one of the largest volunteer programs among federal government agencies.

More than 350 organizations support VAVS and, since the program’s founding in 1946, volunteers have provided more than 676 million hours of service. During the 2010 fiscal year, these dedicated men and women served more than 12.5 million hours, and contributed

in excess of \$100 million in gifts and donations. A great many of our volunteers are Veterans themselves.

With more and more military personnel returning from overseas, the need for volunteers continues to be great. If you’d like to consider participating, you can do so in one of two ways.

1. Contact the Department of Veterans Affairs facility nearest you. Ask for Voluntary Service. Tell the staff of your interest in becoming a VAVS Volunteer. The staff will take care of everything else, including your interview, orientation, and assignment!
2. Visit the VAVS website at www.volunteer.va.gov/apps/VolunteerNow/ and fill out the form on the Volunteer or Donate page. Someone from your local VAVS office will contact you with additional information. ■



Health Screening for Women

In 1988, the Women Veterans Health Program was created to streamline services for women Veterans in order to provide more cost-effective medical and psychosocial care. At that time 4.4 percent of Veterans were women. The current projected percentage of U.S. Veterans who are women is 8 percent.

Women Veterans Health Care addresses the health care needs of women Veterans and works to ensure that timely, equitable, high-quality, comprehensive health care services are provided in a sensitive and safe environment at VA health facilities nationwide.

Women Veterans are urged to schedule regular checkups with their primary care providers, and to discuss their medical history with

the doctor to develop a personalized exam schedule. Below are common screening tests to include in that discussion.

- Clinical Breast Exam
- GYN Exam
- Pap Smear
- Mammography
- Colonoscopy
- Blood Pressure Check
- Cholesterol Screening
- Colorectal Screening
- Physical Check-Ups
- HIV Test

Each of these tests is critical for identifying problems early, when there's the best chance of treating them successfully. The proverbial "ounce of prevention" is indeed one of the keys to a healthy life. ■

Homelessness Among Veterans Declines

The Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development have announced that homelessness among Veterans has dropped by nearly 12 percent between Jan. 2010 and Jan. 2011.

"This new report is good news for the thousands of Veterans we have helped find a home. Our progress has been significant, but our work is not complete until no Veteran has to sleep on the street," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki.

According to the report, 67,495 Veterans were homeless in the United States on a single night in Jan. 2011 – compared to 76,329 a year earlier.

Since 2009, working with over 4,000 community agencies, VA and HUD have housed a total of 33,597 Veterans in permanent housing with dedicated case managers and access to high-quality VA health care.

VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program provides community groups with funding for various services. They include counseling, training, education, financial aid, transportation, child care, rent and utilities. These services are aimed at preventing homelessness, or providing homes for Veterans and family members. ■

Rules Liberalized for Veterans with Undiagnosed Illnesses

Veterans of the Persian Gulf War with undiagnosed illnesses now have an additional five years to qualify for benefits. A recent change in VA regulations affects Veterans of the conflict in Southwest Asia. Many have attributed a range of undiagnosed or poorly understood medical problems to their military services. Chemical weapons, environmental hazards and vaccinations are among the possible causes.

At issue is the eligibility of Veterans to claim VA disability compensation based upon those undiagnosed illnesses, and the ability of survivors to qualify for VA's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.

Formerly, Veterans with undiagnosed illnesses had to establish eligibility for VA benefits by December 31, 2011. The new change pushes the date back to December 31, 2016.

Veterans or survivors who believe they qualify for these benefits should contact VA at 1-800-827-1000. Further information is available online at www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar and www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/oefoif/index.asp. ■

Combatting Military Sexual Trauma

In addition to VA staff and newly enrolled Veterans, the El Paso VA Health Care System provided outreach to more than 2,900 Veterans regarding Military Sexual Trauma (MST) in the past three months. The goal is to educate VA staff and Veterans about MST and how to obtain treatment.

“The term MST is often misunderstood. Most people think it only includes sexual assault,” said Elva Smallwood, El Paso VA’s Military Sexual Trauma Coordinator. The definition used by the VA includes sexual abuse or assault and harassment, as interpreted by the Veteran, during active military duty. However, the perpetrators may not be service personnel, and both men and women can be victims of MST.

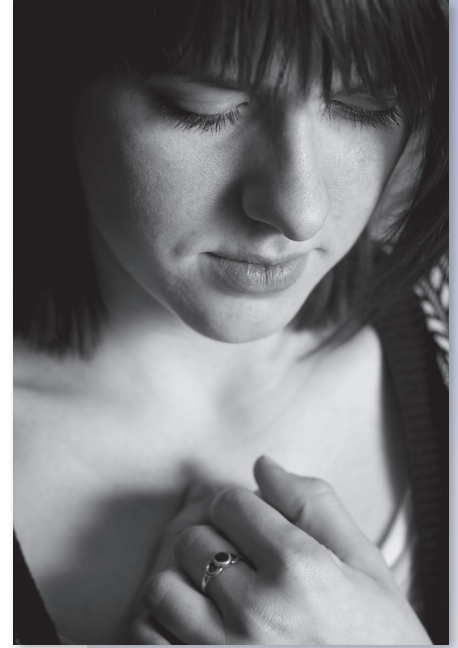
A higher ratio of men and women in the military report MST when compared to the community: 55 percent of women and 14 percent of men. According to Ms. Smallwood, common symptoms can include depression, anger and guilt. “We treat MST with individual therapy and

medication when necessary,” she said. “We also have a women’s MST group and are in the process of creating a men’s group.”

Veterans may be eligible for free MST services even if they’re not eligible for other VA care. There’s no length of service, income or other standard eligibility requirements to receive MST care.

The El Paso VA’s goal is to increase public awareness, as well as educate Veterans and employees about MST. This is accomplished through a variety of methods. All of our new employees are trained on MST, and providers and administrative staff are offered opportunities for advanced training. As part of the National MST Annual Awareness effort, a clothesline is on display at the El Paso VA facility.

For more information about MST, please visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp, or contact Ms. Smallwood at 915-238-4828. ■



El Paso VA Health Care System
5001 North Piedras Street
El Paso, TX 79930

Spring 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 El Paso 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 VASIS 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 El Paso VA Health Care System
915-564-6158 or 1-800-672-3782 ext. 6158
Patient Concerns or Issues
Please contact our Patient Representatives at
915-564-6197
www.ehpaso.va.gov