

Veterans' Health

THE WELLNESS MAGAZINE
FOR OHIO VETERANS

SUMMER 2015



The brain explained

**What you should know
about stroke**

**A “complementary”
approach to health care**

VA Healthcare
System of Ohio





To our readers

Ah, the joys of summer! Try visiting a local farmers market to sample nature's bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables. It's a great way to continue—or start—on a path toward healthier eating.



As you may know, VA's new Choice program offers Veterans easy and convenient access to non-VA health care. Read the article on page 3 to learn more about the Choice program and to

find out if you're eligible.

The brain not only defines who we are, but it also controls many important body functions that we may take for granted. To get a better understanding of this remarkable organ, see page 4.

Turn to page 6 for important information about stroke.

Do you know the difference between complementary and alternative therapies? See page 8 for an explanation and find out what types of services VISN 10 provides.

It's not always easy to make healthy lifestyle changes. Read the article on page 10 to learn how a group of Veterans from Hamilton CBOC is working together to meet and keep their commitment to living well!

Following your prescription delivery is a snap when you enroll in MyHealthVet's online prescription tracking. See page 11 for easy instructions, and sign up.

Shingles is a painful and potentially dangerous illness. The article on the back page describes causes and symptoms of shingles.

As always, we are your partners in good health!

Jack W. Hetrick

— Jack Hetrick, Network Director

About our mailing list

We make every effort to ensure our mailing list is accurate. If you have questions or would like to be added to or deleted from the list, let us know. Please include your entire address. To make a change, you *must* mail the mailing panel to:

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Need addresses and phone numbers to VISN 10 VA sites?

Try the Internet!
www.chillicothe.va.gov
www.cincinnati.va.gov
www.cleveland.va.gov
www.columbus.va.gov
www.dayton.va.gov

What empowers you?
Pass it on!



The Ohio Women Veterans Conference

Aladdin Shrine Center ~ Columbus, Ohio
Saturday, Sept. 12, 2015

Registration: 8 am - 9 am | Conference: 9 am - 4 pm

See www.ohiovet.gov/womenvets

Veterans' Health is published quarterly as a patient education service by VA Healthcare System of Ohio, one of the 21 integrated networks of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care and learn about the many health services available through VA. This publication is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor. All articles may be reproduced for educational purposes.

The Mission of VA Healthcare System of Ohio is:

- To provide Veterans a continuum of care that is accessible, value-added and cost-effective, and of the highest quality, within an environment of outstanding education and research.
- To promote a culture that supports and develops a caring, compassionate, competent and quality-oriented workforce.

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Veterans Choice Program

Connecting you to timely and convenient access to health care in your community



The VA Healthcare System of Ohio works to provide access to care that is timely and convenient. The Veterans Choice Program is part of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA).

The Choice Program is a new, temporary benefit. The program allows some Vets to receive health care outside the VA rather than waiting for a VA appointment.

Learn how you can qualify

Here are the requirements you need to use the Choice Program:

- Vets enrolled in the VA health care system as of Aug. 1, 2014, or a recently discharged combat Veteran.
- You have been told by your local VA that you will need to wait more than 30 days from your preferred date or the date medically determined by your doctor for care.

Choice Program: What you should know

You should have received a letter from the VA with program details, along with a Choice Card. To learn more, visit www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/ or call **866-606-8198**.

- The Choice Program does not affect your VA health care or any other VA benefit.
 - If you are satisfied with your wait time at your VA and wish to wait for VA care, there is nothing you need to do.
 - Care provided outside the VA is only covered by VA for medical needs approved by your VA doctor. VA can only cover the cost of care for your VA-approved health needs.
- Vets who live more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA health care site.
- If you believe this program might apply to you, call **866-606-8198**, and someone will work with you. **VH**

The brain explained

The brain is a 3-pound jewel in the human body. It's the most complex organ, and is responsible for all that defines us as human. The brain is responsible for:

- intelligence
- interpreting senses
- initiating body movement
- controlling behavior

The brain has three basic units:

- forebrain
- midbrain
- hindbrain

The forebrain is the largest and most highly developed part of the human brain. The cerebrum is part of the forebrain. The cerebrum sits at the topmost part of the brain and is the source of intellectual activities. It holds your memories, allows you to plan and enables you to imagine and think. It allows you to recognize friends, read books and play games.

The midbrain includes the uppermost part of the brainstem. It controls some reflex actions. It's part of the circuit involved in the control of eye movements and other voluntary movements.

The hindbrain includes the upper part of the spinal cord, the brain stem and the cerebellum. The hindbrain controls the body's vital functions such as breathing and heart rate. The cerebellum coordinates movement and is involved in learned rote (from memory) movements.

The cerebrum is split into two halves (hemispheres). Both sides communicate with each other through a thick tract of nerve fibers. The ability to form words lies primarily in the left hemisphere. The right hemisphere seems to control many abstract reasoning skills.



Nearly all of the signals going from the brain to the body, and vice versa, cross over on their way to and from the brain. This means that the right hemisphere controls the left side of the body and the left hemisphere controls the right side. When one side of the brain is damaged, the opposite side of the body is affected. For example, a stroke in the right hemisphere of the brain can leave the left arm and leg paralyzed.

How we think

Each hemisphere is divided into lobes. The two frontal lobes lie behind the forehead. When you plan a schedule, imagine the future or use reasoned arguments; these two lobes do much of the work by changing thoughts into words.

The parietal lobes are responsible for the taste, smell and texture of food. And, the forward parts of these lobes receive information about temperature, taste, touch and movement from the rest of the body. Reading and arithmetic are also functions of these lobes.

The occipital lobes are at the back of the brain. As you read the words and pictures on this page, these are the lobes doing the work. This is where images from the eyes are processed and images are stored in memory. Damage to the occipital lobes can cause blindness.

The temporal lobes lie in front of the visual areas and nest under the parietal and frontal lobes. The tops of these lobes receive information from your ears. The undersides of these lobes play a vital role with memory.

When people talk about “gray matter” they are referring to the cortex. Most of our information processing takes place in the cortex.

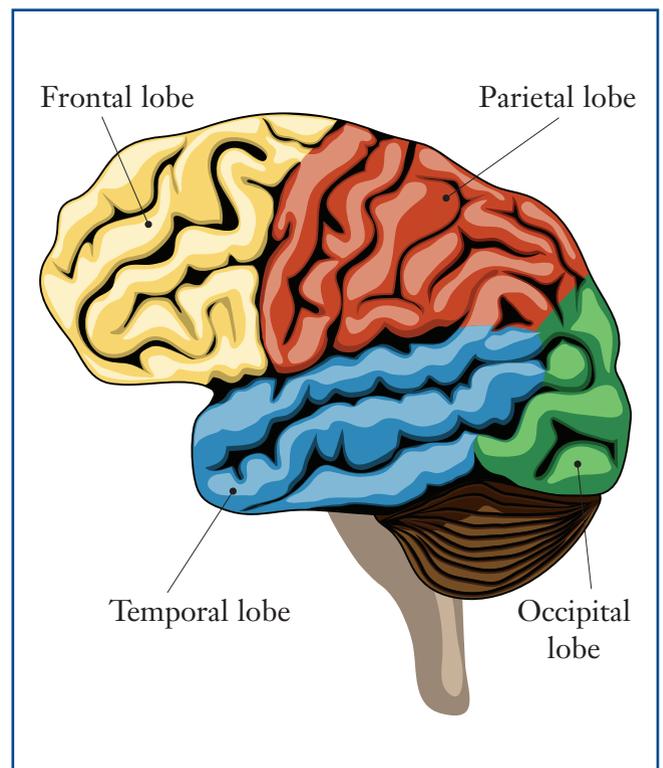
The inner brain

The inner brain works as gatekeeper between the spinal cord and the cerebral hemispheres. The structures of the inner brain house important structures and functions:

- Hypothalamus—an important emotional center that controls feelings
- Thalamus—gatekeeper for information going to and from the spinal cord and brain
- Hippocampus—sends memories to the appropriate part of the brain for storage
- Basal ganglia—initiate and regulate movement

The basal ganglia are clusters of nerve cells surrounding the thalamus. They are responsible for initiating and integrating movements. Parkinson’s disease, which results in tremors, rigidity and a stiff, shuffling walk, is a disease of nerve cells that lead into the basal ganglia.

A healthy brain functions efficiently. But when illness strikes, the results can be devastating. According to the National Institute



of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 1 in 5 people in the United States suffer from damage to the nervous system. Major disorders of the brain include:

- muscular dystrophy
- cerebral palsy
- Parkinson’s disease
- Alzheimer’s disease
- dementia, including AIDS dementia complex
- stroke
- trauma
- epilepsy
- tumors
- infectious diseases **VH**



Stroke: What you need to know

What is a stroke? A stroke occurs if the blood supply to a portion of the brain is blocked or reduced. A stroke is a brain attack! Without oxygen, brain cells start to die after a few minutes. Cerebrovascular accident (CVA) is another name for a stroke. Sudden bleeding in the brain can also cause a stroke if brain cells are damaged.

What causes a stroke?

A stroke may be caused by a blocked artery or the leaking or bursting of a blood vessel. Some people may have only a temporary disruption of blood flow to the brain; this is called a mini-stroke or transient ischemic attack (TIA).

Signs of a stroke

Time is life. Call 911 FAST if you have any of these symptoms. Is it a stroke? Check these signs—FAST!



Face:

Does the face look uneven? To check, ask the person to smile.



Arm:

Does one arm drift off? To check, ask the person to raise both arms.



Speech:

Does the speech sound strange? To check, ask the person to repeat a phrase.



Time:

Every second brain cells die. Call 911 for any signs of a stroke.

A TIA is a brief period of symptoms similar to those of a stroke. It is the result of a temporary decrease in blood supply to a part of your brain, which often lasts less than five minutes. Symptoms may include temporary weakness, numbness, speech changes and blindness. Never ignore a TIA ... it often leads to a stroke.

About 85 percent of strokes are **ischemic strokes**. This type of stroke occurs when the arteries to your brain become narrowed or blocked. This causes a severely reduced blood flow (ischemia) to the brain. A blood clot can form in one of the arteries in your brain. Or the blood clot forms somewhere else in your body and the blood flow carries it to the brain and causes a stroke.

A **hemorrhagic stroke** occurs when a blood vessel in your brain leaks or ruptures. This type of stroke can result from many conditions that affect your blood vessels, such as high blood pressure, anticoagulants and aneurysms (weak spots in the walls of blood vessels).

What are the effects of a stroke?

The effects of a stroke depend on where it occurs in the brain and the amount of damage to the brain. You may experience changes in your behavior or in the use of your arms or legs. **VH**

What's my risk for stroke?

Answer this set of questions to see if you have a greater risk for STROKE. Any "yes" answer means you're at higher risk. The more "yes" answers, the higher your risk for a stroke.

Risks you CAN'T control

- Yes No **AGE:** Are you over the age of 55? Stroke risk doubles every 10 years past age 55. But, a stroke can happen at ANY age!
- Yes No **SEX:** Are you male? Men have a slightly greater risk for stroke than women. But, women live longer than men, so more women are having strokes.
- Yes No **RACE:** Are you African-American or Hispanic? African-Americans and some Hispanics have two to three times greater risk for stroke.
- Yes No **PREVIOUS TIA OR STROKE:** Have you already had a TIA or stroke? TIA or stroke causes a 10 times greater chance of having another stroke.
- Yes No **DIABETES:** Do you have diabetes? As a result of poor circulation from diabetes, the risk for stroke is greater. With good management of your blood sugar, this is a risk factor you can control.
- Yes No **FAMILY HISTORY:** Has a family member had a stroke? Your stroke risk is greater if a parent, grandparent, sister or brother has had a stroke.

Risks you CAN control

- Yes No **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE:** Is your blood pressure more than 140/85 mm Hg? High blood pressure increases the risk for stroke four to six times. You can't feel high blood pressure! Get your blood pressure checked often and take your medicine.
- Yes No **SMOKING:** Do you smoke? Smoking doubles your risk for stroke.
- Yes No **ALCOHOL:** Do you have more than one or two drinks with alcohol a day? Drinking more than one or two drinks a day increases your risk for stroke by three times.
- Yes No **WEIGHT:** Are you overweight? Excess weight puts a strain on your circulation. Excess weight makes it more likely to have other stroke risk factors, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes.
- Yes No **HIGH CHOLESTEROL:** Have you been told your cholesterol is too high? High cholesterol levels increase the risk for both stroke and heart attack. A healthy diet and/or medicine can help lower cholesterol.



What is complementary or alternative health?

No doubt you've seen the terms complementary health or alternative health in ads or on the Internet. These terms apply to using health care methods outside mainstream medical care.

Complementary: Using a non-mainstream approach **along with** mainstream medicine.

Alternative: Using a non-mainstream approach **instead of** mainstream medicine.

Your doctor may decide that a “complementary” approach to your care is needed. If this is the case, you may be referred for a type of care that falls under one of VA's Mind and Body Practices. They include procedures or techniques by a trained practitioner or teacher. Examples include:

- Acupuncture: stimulates certain points on the body using thin needles

- Massage therapy: manipulation of the soft tissues of the body
- Meditation: helps a person learn to focus using mindfulness techniques
- Movement therapies, such as Pilates
- Relaxation techniques: designed to produce the body's natural relaxation response
- Chiropractic care: spinal manipulation applies controlled force to a joint of the spine
- Tai chi: combines certain movements or postures along with breathing and mental focus
- Yoga: combines physical postures or movement, breathing and meditation

VISN 10 offers a wide range of complementary and alternative therapies. See the list on page 9 for an overview of what is offered. Please note that this list is constantly evolving. **VH**

VISN 10 Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Location	Chillicothe	Cincinnati	Cleveland	Columbus	Dayton
Acupressure	✓	✓		✓	
Acupuncture	✓	✓		✓	✓
Aqua Therapy	✓			✓	
Animal Assisted Therapy		✓			✓
Aromatherapy			✓		
Auricular Therapy	✓				
Autogenic Training	✓				
Biofeedback	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chiropractic Care	✓	✓		✓	✓
Deep Breathing Exercises			✓		
Guided Imagery			✓	✓	
Healing Touch		✓			
Kinesiology	✓				
Massage Therapy	**	✓			✓
Meditation		✓	✓		
Mindfulness		✓	✓	✓	✓
Movement Patterning		✓			
Muscle Energy Techniques					✓
Music Therapy		✓	✓		✓
Progressive Muscle Relaxation		✓	✓		✓
Reiki/Therapeutic Touch			✓		
Relaxation Therapy		✓		✓	✓
Soft Tissue Manipulation		✓			✓
Tai Chi	✓		✓		
Yoga	**	✓			✓

✓ = Currently offered

** Future plans to offer

Women's Health program

This year, Dayton and Columbus will offer yoga and special deep relaxation/meditation for female patients with chronic pain and/or depression.

Working together to make better health choices

A group of six Veterans at the Hamilton CBOC have been meeting for over a year. Their monthly “kickstart” session is a shared medical appointment (SMA), but it’s evolved into a special group of friends with similar needs and concerns. Their focus is to support each other in achieving their individual health goals.

Taking positive steps

These Vietnam-era Vets have a great deal in common—they are all motivated to make a change in their health and lifestyles. Geeta Nath, M.D., is their provider. In 2013, Dr. Nath was part of a pilot project to start personalized health plans (PHPs). Scott Page, a VA Health Coach and retired Army Veteran, helps the group take positive steps to achieve their own PHP goals by making better health choices. Page, Dr. Nath and nurses on the team encourage and provide advice when needed. Since this is also a medical appointment, anyone needing medical attention is seen by the team. Dr. Nath states that, over time, group members have used less medical care as they have become more self-sufficient. As one Veteran put it, “If you don’t take care of yourself, no one else will.”

Creating new habits, routines

At one time, all these Vets smoked. Several noted that they struggle with family members who smoke in their homes. Members help each other by sharing ideas on ways to have a healthy, smoke-free environment. The Veterans admit that diets don’t work, but small changes do. They agreed that their weight-loss successes have been due to using portion control at mealtimes, making healthy food choices or simply walking away from the table when full. Since these sessions began, all have lost weight. As a group, they’re drinking less alcohol, and some have lowered their blood sugar levels. A good exercise program is also part of their routines.



Clockwise around the table (starting from the lower-left corner): Health Coach Scott Page; Veterans Daniel Click; Valdene Sharpe; Lloyd Harris; Donald Hetzer Sr.; Paul Wagers; and Ernie Phelps.

Some have workout equipment at home and others have joined local gyms. They share information about the latest discounts at health clubs in the area, hinting that showing your VA ID Card may lead to even more savings.

There is no shame here, only encouragement and friendship. Everyone admits the group had barriers to overcome, but their successes are noteworthy. As one member put it, “Practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.” And with their support team, they’re making it happen. **VH**

Are you ready to make healthy choices?

If you would like more information about PHPs, contact your facility Health Behavior Coordinator or talk to your Primary Care/Patient Aligned Care (PACT) Team.

Easy as one, two, three!

New! Online prescription tracking

You can track delivery of your prescription orders right from home with VA's online prescription tracking, available at My HealthVet.

Just three easy steps:

1. Go to My HealthVet at www.myhealth.va.gov and login on the home page.
2. Select the Pharmacy tab.
3. Select Refill My Prescription or Prescription Refill History to access the red "Track Delivery" button.

With My HealthVet "Track Delivery" you can:

- Track delivery of VA* prescriptions online
- Know when your prescription* package is scheduled to arrive
- View details about tracking information
- Know what is included in the delivery package

Do you refill VA prescriptions online?

Get started. Go to the "Register Today" button on the My HealthVet home page at www.myhealth.va.gov. You must be a VA patient with a My HealthVet account. **VH**

* Delivery tracking is not available for medications dispensed and mailed from your local VA pharmacy. Use routine tracking methods for these medications.

NEW! Receive Rx shipment email notifications

You must be a registered My HealthVet user with a valid email address:

- Login to your My HealthVet account
- Select the Personal Information tab, then Profiles
- Under Subscribe to Email Notifications and Reminders, select Turn On
- Confirm your personal email address under Contact Information and select Save



Retired Army Veteran Jeff Rhinehart can spend more time in the saddle and less time at home waiting for his prescriptions to arrive. He no longer has to call, asking when his medications shipped. "With the My HealthVet tracking tool, I know the exact date a medication will arrive."



Need help?

Contact your VA health care provider or pharmacist with questions about your medication. Help with "Track Delivery" is available through the My HealthVet Help Desk. Call **1-877-327-0022**, Monday-Friday, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST.



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Are you at risk for shingles?

Chances are good that you know someone who's had shingles. It's a very common condition. One in 3 people over age 60 will get shingles in their lifetime. At least 1 million people in the United States get shingles every year.

Shingles is a disease caused by the varicella zoster virus. That is the same virus that causes chickenpox. Only someone who has had chickenpox can get shingles. The virus stays in your body and can cause shingles many years later. The virus may become active again because of age, stress, diseases that affect the immune system or drugs such as steroids or chemotherapy.

Recognize the signs

The first symptoms of shingles are often pain, burning or itching along a band of skin on one side of the body—usually on the head, neck or trunk. These symptoms indicate the nerves where the virus has been reactivated. In a few days, a rash and blisters break out on the skin in a band that follows the nerve's path. Fever, headache and achiness may also occur. If the rash appears on your face, it may affect your vision or hearing.

The shingles rash usually lasts from 2 to 4 weeks. But for about 1 in 5 people, the severe pain of shingles can last for weeks, months or years. Very rarely, a shingles infection can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation or death.

You can't catch shingles from someone who has it. However, a person who's never had

chickenpox (or the chickenpox vaccine) could get chickenpox from someone with shingles. This is not very common, but people with shingles should avoid babies or children who have not had their chickenpox vaccine. Once the rash has healed, the person is no longer contagious.

Get help

A shingles vaccine can reduce your chances of getting shingles. The vaccine is recommended for people age 60 and older. Getting the vaccine reduces your chances of getting shingles by half and your chance of having long-term pain by two-thirds. The vaccine is less effective in people over age 70. Some people should not get the vaccine. Talk to your health care team about whether the shingles vaccine is right for you.

If you think you are getting shingles, call your health care team or the TeleCare Nurse Advice line at **1-888-838-6446**. Early treatment (within 1 to 2 days) with medicines that fight the virus may help you recover faster and prevent lingering pain. **VH**

Be active in your health care!

Learn more about ways to improve your health and reduce your risk of disease at the Veterans Health Library (www.veteranshealthlibrary.org) or in the *Healthwise for Life* handbook available at your VA.