

Veterans' Health

THE WELLNESS MAGAZINE
FOR OHIO VETERANS

WINTER 2014

Everyday tips for a healthy back

Take charge of stress

In their words:
Veterans' personal stories

VA Healthcare
System of Ohio





To our readers

Welcome to the winter issue of *Veterans' Health*. As we look ahead to 2015, take time out of your busy schedule to consider your health goals for the new year.



Learn more about VA's Telehealth programs (see page 3) and what they can do for you. Ask your provider if this program could help you better manage your health.

Winter's ice and snow can mean danger for your back and spine. Read the first of our two-part series (page 4) for ways to prevent back and spine injuries.

VA and VISN 10 take mental health issues seriously, and we are working to help Veterans in many ways. On page 6, we explain how anxiety and stress can affect us, both mentally and physically, and we offer tips on how to cope. Did you know that VISN 10 offers non-drug alternatives to help you manage pain? Turn to page 8 to learn more!

We encourage Veterans to think of emotional well-being as an important part of their overall health. The article on page 10 describes how VISN 10 is integrating mental health care into primary care. We also highlight important information about depression and anxiety in women (page 11).

If you're looking for some inspiration to get started on the path to good health, check out Chuck Grabow's story on page 12.

We wish all our Veterans a healthy and happy 2015.

— 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

Cincinnati Alzheimer's and dementia caregiver support group

Cincinnati VA is offering a new peer support group. It is for people who are caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's or dementia. Members discuss the issues caregivers face and provide support to others who have the same concerns. The group is led by a social worker.

The group meets once a month. To learn more, call Elizabeth Bross, Social Worker, at **1-800-272-3900**.



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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Guy Palermo (left) and nurse P. Melnyk use Telehealth to track Guy's health status.

Telehealth

Your link to VA care

VISN 10 has offered its Veterans a range of remote treatment options through its Home Telehealth program since early 2004. The program is free of charge to Veterans. And, the program has a long history of successful outcomes.

Veterans enrolled in this program are given a unique monitoring device as well as other technical options to use. This device allows remote communication with their Home Telehealth nurse from the comfort of their own homes. The nurse is able to review valuable data such as blood sugar, weight, blood pressure, blood oxygen level and heart rate. In some cases, nurses can even listen to live streaming of heart and lung sounds through the use of a digital stethoscope. The Telehealth nurse is the link between the Veteran and Veteran's doctor. By keeping up with the status of the person's current health, timely changes, as needed, are able to be made to the Veteran's plan of care.

A great idea

Guy Palermo has been enrolled in the Cleveland VA's Home Telehealth program since March 2013. He has been very pleased with his experience. Guy credits the VA and its Home Telehealth program with improvement in his health status over the past year and a half. "I'm going to tell you what,"

Benefits of Telehealth

VISN 10's Home Telehealth program treated more than 8,000 Veterans during 2014. And, we expect a big increase in enrollment over the next year. We've seen a 26 percent decrease in ER visits and a 35 percent decrease in hospital admissions for our enrolled Vets. As a result, there's been a 56 percent decrease in bed days of care. In addition, outcomes show improved blood glucose levels, body mass index readings and blood pressure. Thanks to the education Veterans receive while in this program, improved outcomes continue even after discharge from the program.

For more information on the Home Telehealth program, contact your local VAMC and ask to speak with the Facility Telehealth Coordinator.

says Guy. "I think the Home Telehealth program is a great idea and the follow-up with my nurse (P. Melnyk) has been great. When I have a question and need help, she's right there for me. I owe the VA my life, and this program is a huge part of that. This program gives me the information I need to do the right things. If a Veteran is enrolled and they do what they're told, it's going to work." **VH**



Part one of a two-part series

Back health and spine safety

Your back or spine is composed of movable bones called vertebrae. Between each vertebra is a shock-absorbing cushion called a disc. Vertebrae and discs are held in place by strong ligaments and muscles. A well-aligned, healthy back has three curves at the neck, chest and lower back. You maintain those three curves and keep your back healthy by using proper posture when you sit, stand or lift and by exercising to keep your back muscles strong. Poor posture and muscle weakness are commonly found in individuals who sit every day as part of their jobs; like office workers, bus drivers or computer operators.

Everyday tips for back health



Posture. Change your posture frequently. When sitting, sit in the back of the chair, not at the edge, to provide better support to your spine. Your head should be over your shoulders. Do not let it protrude in front of your body as this can injure your neck. When standing for a long time, place one foot up on a stool to reduce lower back stress.



Stretching. Stretch frequently. Simple stretches throughout the day will keep your back flexible and strong. Try this easy stretch: While standing, place your hands on your lower back and lean gently backward without tipping back your head.



Exercise. Regular exercise strengthens back muscles and prevents back injuries. Abdominal strengthening exercises can also prevent back injury. Sports like diving, golf, tennis, gymnastics and football can be harmful to the back when not done properly. Trampolines can cause severe back injuries.



Protect your back and spine

Watch for more tips on keeping your back and spine safe in the spring edition of *Veterans' Health*!

Lifestyle changes



Lose weight. Excess weight can alter spine alignment and cause back injury. Shed extra pounds with 30 minutes of exercise a day and maintain a healthy diet with plenty of fruits, grains and vegetables.



Decrease your stress. Stress causes muscle tension, which can cause back pain. Find healthy ways to control your stress like regular exercise, relaxation and plenty of sleep.



Stop smoking. Smoking tobacco decreases circulation to the back muscles and discs. Discs can get thinner and provide less cushioning to the bones, leading to back injury.

Snow and ice winter safety

Think prevention. In cold temperatures, approach with caution and assume that all wet, dark areas on pavements are slippery and icy. Try these tips to help you walk safely on ice and snow:

- Extend your arms out to your sides to maintain

your balance. If you are carrying a heavy backpack or other load, your sense of balance will be off. Try not to carry too much and leave your hands and arms free for balance.

- To maintain your balance, keep your hands out of your pockets. Point your feet out slightly and walk like a penguin!
- Watch where you are stepping and go SLOWLY!
- Be careful on steps; always use a hand railing and plant your feet firmly on each step.
- Use special care when entering and exiting cars; use the vehicle for support.
- Avoid boots or shoes with smooth soles and heels. Wear shoes or boots that provide traction.
- Wear a heavy coat to pad. This will help pad your body if you do fall.

Understanding back health and spine safety is important in preventing injuries and disabilities. Back pain is preventable when you engage in healthy habits that keep your back in good condition. Increased awareness of activities that place your spine at risk for life changing injury can help you to make better decisions about how you go about everyday activities. **VH**



Mental health

Take charge of stress and anxiety

Feelings of anxiety and stress are part of the human experience. That is to say, anxiety and stress are normal reactions that people experience. Although anxiety may feel unpleasant, such feelings serve an important role in keeping people safe. Anxiety is the body's response to a perceived threat. Such threats may be:

- physical, such as the possibility of death or injury
- social, such as rejection or embarrassment
- mental, such as the fear of losing control or “going crazy”

Effects of stress

When you detect danger, either real or perceived, changes begin to occur in your body and brain. Often, these changes are called the “fight-or-flight” response. Your body will ready itself for

action in the face of danger, either to fight off or flee the source of danger. The body will focus most of its energy in places that are needed to keep the body alert and “on guard.” Major processes such as heart rate, breathing rate and muscle activation increase. You may notice physical symptoms, including rapid heart rate, short, shallow breathing and tight or restless muscles.

If feelings of anxiety and stress are such normal reactions, then why are they the most common reasons people seek out mental health support? A good way to address this question would be to liken anxiety and stress symptoms to house alarms. House alarms are not bad things; in fact they serve to protect us. On the other hand, if the house alarms were going off all day, every day, then they become bad things. The alarms make it difficult



Research shows that physical activity is one of the best ways to manage stress and anxiety

to function and perform day-to-day tasks. In large part, this is how mental health professionals decide between anxiety symptoms that are expected versus those that may require treatment. In other words, when feelings of anxiety persist for longer than expected and impair how a person is able to function, help is needed. When symptoms become more severe than the expected stress reaction, help may be needed from a mental health professional.

When feelings of stress and anxiety last for a very long time (become chronic), they can have consequences. Prolonged stress and anxiety may affect your ability to function at work or at school. It can also affect your social and/or personal relationships. Symptoms of stress and anxiety can impact your physical health as well. People who have chronic stress and anxiety are at a greater risk of getting sick, impaired growth and may have problems with reproductive health.

Control stress

Feelings of stress and anxiety can't be avoided. To live healthy is not to be stress-free, but rather to manage stress in a healthy way. Here are some tips for managing stress:

- **Exercise.** Research shows that physical activity is one of the best ways to manage stress and anxiety.

- **Sleep.** It's not just the amount of time you sleep. Your sleep quality influences your ability to manage stress and anxiety.

- **Healthy eating.** A poor diet can impair your ability to manage stress and anxiety.

- **Limit caffeine.** Too much caffeine can activate and make physical symptoms of anxiety worse.

- **Positive thinking.** We can train our brain with practice, over time, to be more appreciative, patient and optimistic.

- **Externalize.** Most of us are familiar with feeling better after “venting” or confiding in someone we trust. But, talking to others is only one way to externalize feelings. Many people benefit from other forms of externalizing, such as journaling, creating art (drawing, painting, etc.), playing music or praying.

- **Manage stress.** Carve out and prioritize time for self-care and relaxation.

- **Breathing exercises.** Taking slow, deep breaths can be a very helpful method for calming the body down. VA provides a free smartphone application, **breathe2relax**, that guides you through breathing exercises for relaxation.

- **Daily routine.** Keep to daily routine or schedule to avoid being too overwhelmed with daily decisions. This can be particularly helpful when situational or environmental stress is increased. **VH**

Exciting improvements in pain management



**Battlefield Auricular
Acupuncture is a quick
and effective way to
reduce pain.**

Pain medicines called opioids (narcotics) are potentially dangerous. Opioid overdose is now the No. 1 cause of accidental death in the United States. Veterans are twice as likely to die from accidental overdoses as others. Accidental overdoses can occur even if you are taking your medications exactly as prescribed. VISN 10 has been actively changing pain management practices to protect Veterans from the dangers of overdose.

For your safety, if opioids are prescribed for you, it is important that you are on the lowest dose that will reduce your pain and improve your functioning. During the next year, all Veterans who are prescribed opioids to manage chronic pain will be asked to review and sign a special consent form. This form ensures you know what the dangers are and how to be safe when using these drugs.

Another option

To reduce the use of opioids, complementary alternative medicine (CAM), which are non-drug therapies, are now offered in many VAs. Acupuncture is one type of CAM that is being used. The health care provider places fine needles along specific points on the skin to help relieve pain. Research shows acupuncture to be efficient, safe and widely accepted as a therapy for people with chronic pain problems.

VISN 10 offers Battlefield Auricular Acupuncture (BFA). BFA was first introduced on the combat front line as a way to quickly and effectively reduce pain for acutely injured soldiers. BFA is now being taught and used in VAs. BFA uses tiny needles that look like small earrings. These tiny needles are inserted into the ear at specific points. Pain is usually reduced significantly. See “*BFA: What Veterans are saying*” to learn more.

Manage your pain

Many non-drug approaches have been shown to help with managing chronic pain. Veterans are often surprised to learn how much they can do to relieve pain without having to rely on others. Pain School is a great way to explore these self-management approaches. Here are some ways to help ease your pain.

1. Promote healthy sleep habits:

- Turn off phones and computers about 30 minutes before going to bed.
- Keep your bedroom cool (60 to 70 degrees).
- Make sure your mattress firmly supports your weight.
- Stop eating at least an hour before you go to bed.
- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes and coffee or tea several hours before sleep.
- If you can't get to sleep, get up and go into another room and do a quiet activity, such as reading a book. Later, you can return to your bed and try to sleep.

2. Cut back on foods containing sugar:

- Limit or avoid your intake of cake, cookies, pop and candy.
- Be aware of processed foods such as crackers and boxed or canned foods that may contain sugar.

Foods that are high in refined sugar can promote inflammation in your body.

3. Consider meditation to help relieve stress and tension.

Simply slowing your breathing and making each breath deeper when you are in stressful situations helps lower your stress. Stress can increase pain and other conditions, including blood sugar, blood pressure, irritability, muscle tension and digestive problems

4. Speak with a dietitian about losing some weight.

- Losing even as little as 10 pounds can make a big

BFA: What Veterans are saying

Here's what some VISN 10 Veterans are saying about using BFA to manage their pain:

"I had the 'Battlefield Acupuncture' done. I cannot believe it—so much better, instantly!"
(Cincinnati Veteran through Quikcard comment)

"I suffer from severe back and joint pain. Putting on shoes is a struggle. The VA answer to my problem was pain pills. That was until Dr. X put me into a program that gave me back the use of my body without opiates. Chiropractic medicine, kinesiotherapy, yoga and acupuncture became my treatment regimen. I did not have to wait for a pill to sometimes take effect. The pain relief without the drugs is amazing. I do not miss the side effects ... Thank-you for these programs." *(Chillicothe Veteran)*

"I am totally amazed at the instant relief. I do not know what the long-term effects will be but I do know I will recommend this procedure to anyone suffering from pain." *(Columbus Veteran)*

BFA is available at all VISN 10 medical centers except Cleveland. There are 11 BFA practitioners, and we plan to train and add more in the future.

improvement for your joints and reduce the risk for serious injury to your back, knees and hips.

5. Talk with your doctor about beginning a regular exercise program. These low-impact activities can help you build strength and flexibility:

- yoga or tai chi
- walking
- biking
- swimming
- gentle stretching

Talk with your primary care physician about the availability of BFA and if you might benefit. Don't forget to ask how you can enroll in Pain School. **VH**

How's your quality of life?



Integrating mental health into VA primary care clinics is a central idea to the Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT). This model of care centers on having mental health specialists as part of your team. Research tells us that up to 60 percent of all primary care visits have a mental or behavioral health component. These issues can have a great impact on your overall health. By having mental health staff as a part of your PACT team, it allows these needs to be met in the most timely and seamless way. This partnership allows you to focus on your whole health and your quality of life (QOL).

How QOL is defined is really up to each person. One of the greatest impacts on QOL is how well you are able to function day to day. People think about the impact of their medical problems on how well they function and their QOL. But often, people fail to consider how their emotional health impacts their well-being.

Primary Care Mental Health Integration (PCMHI) is a team of mental health staff members

who are part of the PACT team. The PCMHI team includes psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses and clinical social workers. They work closely with you and your PACT team to help you achieve greater QOL.

Your PCMHI team can help address many mental health issues including:

- sadness
- grief
- nervousness or worry
- sleep-related problems
- adjusting to and managing chronic illness
- tobacco use
- alcohol or drug misuse

Behavioral health issues are common, and we can help! With PCMHI staff working side-by-side with your PACT team, we are better able to create a treatment plan that's right for you. We encourage Veterans to think about emotional well-being as an important part of their total health care. **VH**

My HealthVet at work for you

NEW! Track VA prescription deliveries

Veterans made 1.8 million phone calls to VA to ask about prescription (Rx) deliveries last year—2.4 million used My HealthVet online for their refills. Now My HealthVet has a great new tool for tracking VA Rx deliveries online. **VA Prescription Tracking** is located on the website's Pharmacy page.

It allows Vets to track an Rx filled in the last 45 days. Mailed narcotics cannot be tracked online. Enjoy the convenience of this great new tool. Sign-up for a My HealthVet account today at www.myhealth.va.gov. Upgrade your account with identity proofing at your local VA to view prescription names. **VH**

Veterans Health Library is here!

The Veterans Health Library offers you 24/7 access to a wide range of health care information. Available online at www.veteranshealthlibrary.org or via My HealthVet. Save it to your favorites!



Mental health care for women



The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) tells us that one in four people in the U.S. have a mental health issue and less than half of these people receive treatment.

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental health issues. The good news is that they can be successfully treated.

Depression

Depression can be mild to severe. Women are twice as likely to have a major depressive episode as men. Those with severe depression may even have thoughts of suicide. Again, depression can be treated.

It's more than just feeling down or having a "blue mood" once in a while. Symptoms of depression include:

- feeling sad nearly every day (can last weeks, months and even years!)
- problems sleeping
- changes in appetite
- loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- lack of energy

Anxiety

Anxiety is another common mental health issue. A 2009 study by the Department of Health and Human Services found that women are two to three times more likely to have an anxiety disorder than men. Symptoms of anxiety include:

- excessive worrying
- restlessness
- difficulty concentrating
- irritability
- muscle tension
- problems sleeping

There is research looking into why women seem to have more mental health issues than men. It is likely that genetic, biological, chemical,

hormonal, environmental, psychological and social issues are all contributing factors.

Some scientists are interested in the influence of female hormones, which change throughout a woman's life. Research shows that hormones affect the brain chemistry that controls emotions and mood. Certain times during a woman's life may be a factor, such as puberty; the times before menstrual periods; before, during and just after pregnancy (postpartum); and just before and during menopause (perimenopause).

VA providers offer many treatments that have very good results. Psychotherapy can help with mild depression and anxiety. Other methods to treat depression include behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, as well as acceptance and commitment therapy. For more severe depression, medication along with therapy is helpful.

Here are some ways you can take care of your mental health:

- Talk to your health care providers. Make sure to get a yearly physical. Many physical health issues can "mimic" mental health symptoms (such as thyroid issues).
- Pursue treatment options—medications and/or therapy.
- Exercise has a positive impact on your mood! It helps control stress and improves your overall well-being.
- Set realistic goals. Know that recovery takes time.
- Connect with supporters—family, friends or a support group.
- Practice gratitude and replace negative thinking with more positive (or neutral) thinking. **VH**

Veteran discovers his path to good health

Chuck Grabow had been struggling with high blood pressure for several months. He had been working with his PACT nurse, Crystal, to try to get it under control. Each month, they talked about diet and exercise, and adjustments were made to increase his blood pressure medication. He took his medication as prescribed, but couldn't seem to improve his diet and exercise.

Chuck's third visit with Crystal went a bit differently. She invited Chuck to work on a personalized health plan (PHP). By working through the plan together, Crystal learned that Chuck is dedicated to taking care of his family and employees. Chuck did not want to become so disabled that he became a burden to his family. He found his motivation to stay healthy and do what he could to improve his health.

Crystal explained the Wheel of Health. Chuck was able to identify many areas where he was doing well. He already knew that he wanted to improve



Chuck Grabow (left) and Crystal worked together to create his PHP.

his eating and physical activity. As he reviewed all the areas on the wheel and how they impact one another, he discovered that managing stress was his biggest challenge. It was keeping him from making diet and exercise changes. And, of course, stress affects blood pressure!

Crystal introduced Chuck to Ruth Lukey, a social worker with Primary Care Mental Health Integration, to help him find ways to reduce stress. He and Ruth met briefly that day to get started.

Before meeting Ruth, though, Crystal took his blood pressure and it was normal! Did the PHP process help reduce Chuck's stress and lower his blood pressure? Actually, Cincinnati VA nurses report several examples of improved blood pressure when they help Veterans work on their PHPs! **VH**