

Veterans

The VA MidSouth Healthcare Network Wellness Journal

Health Watch

Winter 2008

**6 reasons
to get moving!**

**Prevent colds and
flu this winter**

**Recognizing—and
beating—depression**

Relieve sinusitis pain

MidSouth
Healthcare Network



Looking forward in 2008

Dear Veteran:

The horizon looks bright in 2008 for VA MidSouth Healthcare Network. Several new initiatives are underway as well as improvements to existing services. Many of these endeavors are the result of feedback and input from our patients.

If you're an inpatient at any of our medical centers this year, a staff member may ask you about your experience. If you're treated in an outpatient capacity, you may receive a survey in the mail following your visit. I encourage you to take a few minutes to respond. We're always looking for ways to improve your care.

Another undertaking for 2008 is a discussion group for those who recently served active combat duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. You may be contacted by your local VA medical center to participate in a small, hour-long discussion group to tell us about your transition to VA and the care you received.

Finally, I'd like to draw your attention to a report released in December entitled "The Health Care System for Veterans: An Interim Report," published by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). This 18-page document outlines the progress the Department of Veterans Affairs has made in recent years and insightful information about the quality of our health care, how technology has bolstered our services, special eligibility for combat veterans, priority groups and more.

It's easy for me to say we provide excellent care, but with an independent agency like the CBO reporting that the average ratings for VA patients were higher than for patients in private-sector health care organizations, it means we're on the right track and that others are taking note. You can access the report at www.cbo.gov.

Starting out the New Year with high marks raises the bar in our efforts to keep you in the best health possible.

John Dandridge, Jr.
Network Director

Veterans Health Watch is a wellness journal published quarterly by the VA MidSouth Healthcare Network (VISN 9). *Veterans Health Watch* is designed to promote healthy lifestyles and give veterans and their personal caregivers insightful information about managing and accessing health care from VA Medical Centers within VISN 9.

This publication is not a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

Your feedback is welcomed. If you would like to comment on any of the articles or submit information for possible publication, please write to:

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Don't catch the fever

Colds and flu can lead to serious conditions, like bacterial pneumonia, if not treated properly.

Steer clear of the bacteria and viruses that cause respiratory infections.

Here's how:

■ **Get immunized.** Adults who have chronic heart or kidney disease, chronic bronchitis, cystic fibrosis, asthma, emphysema, chronic anemia, severe diabetes or an impaired immune system should have a yearly flu shot. Adults ages 50 or older should also be vaccinated, as should health care workers, police officers and firefighters. If you're age 65 or older, you should also receive the pneumonia vaccine.

■ **Cut down on handshakes.** Today, schoolchildren are taught to cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbows. But most adults still use their hands to cover up a cough or sneeze. While this prevents infected droplets from getting into the air, it makes hand-to-hand contact risky business for anyone trying to stay well.

■ **Wash your hands.** You can pick up bacteria and viruses on countertops, faucets and door knobs. Frequent hand washing with soap and water will help keep any germs on your hands from reaching your mouth, nose or eyes—popular entry points for microscopic invaders.

■ **Protect your immune system.** Like the rest of your body, your immune system works better when it gets enough rest, enough exercise and enough of the right foods. Eating a balanced diet that includes lots of fruits, vegetables and grain products will supply your body with the vitamins and minerals it needs to fight off illness. ■



Self-treatment do's and don'ts

Follow these steps when a cold or the flu strikes:

- **Drink plenty of fluids and avoid antihistamines.** This will help keep secretions thin and deprive microorganisms of a breeding ground in the lungs.
- **Don't smoke or drink alcohol.** Both can disrupt the body's ability to flush out invading microorganisms.
- **Don't take antibiotics to treat a cold or other viral infection.** Antibiotics can't fight viruses, and taking them when you don't need them diminishes their ability to fight a bacterial infection, like pneumonia.
- **Act quickly at the first sign of pneumonia.** Fever lasting more than three days, chest pain when taking a deep breath and a "wet" cough are reasons to see your doctor ASAP.



More than

The facts about depression

Everyone feels “down” sometimes. It’s normal to grieve over the death of a loved one, a serious illness, the loss of a job or even retirement. But when does normal sadness turn into depression, and what can be done about it?

Contrary to what many people believe, depression is not a normal part of life or a sign of personal weakness. Rather, depression is a treatable medical illness with defined symptoms and prescribed treatment regimens. Chemicals in the brain, known as neurotransmitters, are responsible for regulating our emotions. Depression occurs when there’s an imbalance among these neurotransmitters causing a communication disruption.

Depression can occur at any stage of life, but some stages, such as adolescence and older adulthood, are particularly challenging. In fact, suicide rates are the highest among individuals over age 65.

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Recognizing depression

The symptoms of depression can vary among individuals. Common symptoms include loss of interest in normal activities and feelings of emptiness, apathy and withdrawal. A person may also be unable to concentrate, have problems sleeping, lose his or her appetite or have other physical complaints.

A thorough evaluation by a physician is the first step in diagnosing depression and is essential because depression can be a complication of another medical problem. Your doctor may treat your depression or refer you to a psychiatrist.

If depression is diagnosed, treatment can begin to relieve symptoms within a few weeks.

a mood

Standard treatments for depression include psychotherapy, antidepressant medication or a combination of both.

Learning how to cope

Psychotherapy helps patients manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Cognitive behavior therapy focuses on changing negative thought patterns and learning coping skills for a more productive and satisfying life.

Antidepressant medications that help restore the natural balance of brain chemicals are often enough to relieve depression. These drugs are non-addictive, and many newer antidepressants have fewer side effects than earlier ones. Antidepressants take effect gradually, so it can take a few weeks before patients notice that the medication is working.

Unfortunately, most people who are depressed don't seek help because they don't recognize that they need it or they perceive depression as a personal failing and are embarrassed to admit they need help.

When depression is part of a larger problem

Depression is sometimes a secondary effect of medication, lifestyle behaviors or another medical condition. Among the possible causes are:

- medications (such as high blood pressure, heart and glaucoma medications, corticosteroids and certain antihistamines)
- a recent infectious illness such as the flu, mononucleosis or hepatitis
- thyroid problems
- hormonal disturbances, such as menopause
- diabetes
- poor diet or lack of exercise
- lack of sunlight (known as seasonal affective disorder, which occurs during the dark fall and winter months)

The road to recovery

Recovery from depression is a lifelong process

that builds on individual strengths and focuses on building wellness tools to enhance your quality of life. Some key components of recovery include education and support. It's essential that individuals experiencing depression seek treatment. Depression is a treatable illness, and prompt treatment speeds the recovery process. ■



7 signs that may signal depression

If you have two or more of these symptoms that last for two weeks or longer, consult a doctor or call your local VA center for a referral:

- lasting feelings of sadness, hopelessness or anxiety
- decreased interest in—and decreased ability to enjoy—activities, people and things
- difficulty concentrating, slow thinking or indecisiveness
- changes in appetite or sleep habits
- feelings of worthlessness
- loss of energy and motivation
- thoughts of death or suicide

6 reasons to get moving



ou'll find yourself with more energy, a better outlook and, most important, better health by making physical activity part of your daily schedule. Check out this list of exercise benefits.

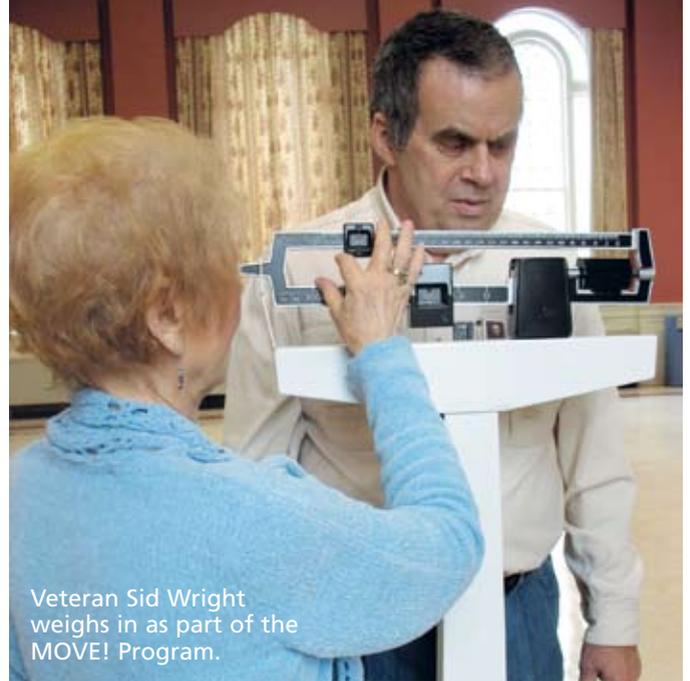
- 1 Reduces heart disease risk.** Exercise protects against heart disease by improving your cholesterol profile, reducing your triglyceride levels and lowering blood pressure.
- 2 Prevents osteoporosis.** The development of the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis can be slowed through regular weight-bearing exercises like walking, jogging, stair climbing and aerobics.
- 3 Controls diabetes.** Studies show that adult-onset diabetes is much less likely to develop in active people than in nonactive people. For those who have the disease, regular exercise may help reduce or eliminate the need for medication.
- 4 Fights obesity.** When excess weight is dropped through exercise and a low-fat diet, the risks for heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and osteoarthritis drop along with it.
- 5 Increases flexibility.** Regular exercise strengthens muscles and keeps joints, tendons and ligaments more flexible, allowing active people to move freely and easily.

6 Elevates mood. Health experts say exercise can improve a person's mood and reduce anxiety and tension.

VA's MOVE! program

Sid Wright of Catlettsburg, Ky., was motivated to change his lifestyle when his doctor told him he would develop diabetes within a year if he didn't lose weight.

"My biggest excuse was that obesity runs in the



Veteran Sid Wright weighs in as part of the MOVE! Program.

family," says Wright. "But that's not true at all. I really started putting on the weight when I retired, because of my inactivity."

Wright turned to the MOVE! (Managing Overweight/Obese Veterans Everywhere) program at the Huntington VA Medical Center for help. In just eight months, he lost more than 50 pounds. As a result, Wright's blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol levels are now normal, and he tries to walk five miles every day and rides a bicycle.

Wright credits VA and the MOVE! program for providing him with the right information and the desire to make the needed changes to his lifestyle.

"Everyone needs something to motivate them," Wright says. "The bottom line is you've got to move to lose." ■

Sign up today!

VA's National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention developed MOVE! to address overweight and obese adults within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). For more information, contact:

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Recognizing and relieving sinusitis



hammering facial pain and pressure. Fatigue. Fever and chills. Nasal obstruction. A diminished sense of smell. Coughing. Do you recognize these symptoms? Then you're probably suffering from sinusitis. Sinusitis occurs when your sinus-membrane lining becomes inflamed, making tissues swell and preventing mucus from draining properly through your small sinus channels. Acute sinusitis is often marked by a thick, green or yellow nasal discharge and can last up to four weeks or more. It responds well to antibiotics and decongestants. Chronic sinusitis is defined as at least four recurrences of acute sinusitis.

What can you do?

See your doctor if you have sinusitis symptoms. He or she may suggest a thorough exam by an ear, nose and throat specialist (an otolaryngologist), especially if you have chronic sinusitis. You may also need diagnostic tests, such as a mucus culture, X-rays, allergy testing or a CT scan of the sinuses. After that, your doctor might recommend one of these options:

■ **Homespun relief.** Warm, moist air from a vaporizer or steam from a pan of boiled water (removed from the stove) can help ease sinus congestion. (Use a humidifier only if the filter is kept clean, so you're not recirculating bacteria into the air.) Warm compresses can also help.

While saline nose drops moisturize and are safe for continuous use, don't use nonprescription, medicated nasal sprays for extended periods of time. They can cause a "rebound" effect, making your condition worse. And if you smoke, it's important to refrain when sinusitis flares up. Reduce alcohol consumption and drink extra fluids



(especially soup or tea) to loosen impacted mucus. Aspirin, ibuprofen or antihistamines may also help, but check with your doctor first.

■ **Rx help.** Acute sinusitis is generally treated with antibiotics for 10 to 14 days to fight the bacterial infection and clear up symptoms. Your doctor may also prescribe an oral or topical decongestant.

■ **Surgical solution.** If you suffer from severe sinus pain and antibiotics aren't helping, you may benefit from functional endoscopic sinus surgery (FESS), a minimally invasive procedure. The surgeon inserts an endoscope through the nose into the sinuses to clean and drain them and remove any obstructive growths. The surgery enlarges the natural openings of the sinuses and can often restore the normal flow of mucus. ■

VA MidSouth Healthcare Network

www.visn9.va.gov/

The right care,
the right time,
the right place



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