

Veterans'

Fall 2003

HealthMatters

The Wellness Magazine from
the VA Sierra Pacific Network

**Network
Highlights**

Aging Skin

**Tips For
Preventing
Medical Errors**

Oral Health

**Grave Marker
Requests**



Network

Highlights

Care When You Need It

Veterans continue to seek health care services at VA facilities in record numbers. In Fiscal Year 2000, the VA Sierra Pacific Network provided care to slightly more than 150,000 veterans. We estimate that in Fiscal Year 2003, we provided care to nearly 200,000 veterans—a growth rate of more than 10 percent per year.

We are proud that so many veterans are choosing VA facilities for their health care needs. It is a pleasure and honor to meet our commitment to our nation's heroes.

However, in some locations we are experiencing “growing pains.” That is, at some VA facilities, the wait for a new primary care or specialty care (e.g., orthopedics) appointment is longer than our goal of 30 days.

In order to improve the availability of clinic appointments, all of our facilities are implementing Advanced Clinic Access (ACA). ACA is an innovative approach to ensure you can obtain care when you need it.

ACA matches “supply and demand.” Fewer routine appointments are made and more “same day” appointments are available. By reducing the number of appointments more than 30 days in advance, the number of “no shows,” cancellations and changes are reduced.

We are also adding clinic exam rooms, enhancing our telephone care programs, and increasing clinic appointment reminders. With all these changes, veterans are able to get appointments when the need arises.

In the following articles, you may read how ACA is being implemented at the VA medical center and clinic near you. All of our dedicated health care providers and support staff are working very hard to provide the accessible services that you expect and deserve.

Robert L. Wiebe, M.D., M.B.A.
Director, VA Sierra Pacific Network

VA Central California Health Care System (VACCHCS): Decreased wait times

Veterans have experienced decreased waiting times and improved clinic schedules with the incorporation of Advanced Clinic Access strategies and teamwork. Changing from four primary care clinics to two, veterans are now assigned to a flexible health care team that is more efficient and effective in patient care management. Nursing staff are more

active in nurse case management, which permits physicians to better utilize their time attending to acute patients.

Same day access for walk-in patients without appointments has been a challenge. But, by setting aside 20 percent of scheduled daily appointment times, staff are able to fit these veterans into appointments the same day. In addition,

many veterans walk-in for prescription refills, general questions, and/or non-acute needs. Adding staff to the Telephone Care Program (888-826-2838 or 559-228-6933) as well as changing to 24-hour telephone operator service, veterans have found their medical needs can best be addressed over the phone and avoid unnecessary travel.

VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS): Same-day appointments

The Spark M. Matsunaga VA Medical Center and neighbor island Community Based Outpatient Clinics have decreased wait times by ensuring that each physician has two fully equipped examination rooms and sufficient support staff (nurses, clerks, pharmacists, social workers, etc.) to aid in seeing veterans in a timely manner. While veterans are encouraged to make appointments for routine care, urgent problems requiring care may also arise. To accommodate this need, the physicians' schedules have same-day appointments built in. An informative Patient Orientation is held each month and is well attended by veterans and their families. Our Advice Nurse program is available 24 hours, 7 days a week by calling (808) 433-0852 (Oahu) or (800) 214-1306 (Neighbor Island and Guam).

VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS): Continuity of care instruction form provided

VANCHCS is improving access to quality care and reducing clinic wait times by gradually discontinuing the practice of routinely scheduling patients for follow-up appointments with their primary care provider. Instead, patients are instructed on when to call for a follow-up appointment. This expands our ability to provide patients with same day appointments and at the same time decrease the no-show and cancellation rate since patients can schedule their appointments when it is most convenient for them.

At the conclusion of each primary care visit, we provide our patients with a continuity of care instruction form containing information on scheduling laboratory, diagnostic, specialty exams, or follow-up appointments, and information on whom to call in case they have questions.

We are working to reduce our no-show rate by using our automated appointment reminder system, which calls to remind patients four days in advance of upcoming appointments. In addition, our dedicated staff and volunteers call to remind patients one day prior to their appointment. These reminders allow patients an opportunity to cancel or reschedule an appointment in advance, so the appointment slot may be provided to another veteran. Patients may cancel or reschedule appointments by calling our toll free Telephone Care Program 24-hours a day, 7 days a week at (800) 382-8387.

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS): Access is primary goal

VASNHCS is improving your access to health care through the use of Advanced Clinic Access (ACA) concepts and strategies. Our goal is to provide you access to your health care team when you need it. The biggest change veterans will notice is how appointments are scheduled. With few exceptions, primary care appointments are not scheduled more than 30 days in advance, which helps us better manage our clinic schedules. It also

reduces the number of no-shows and appointment cancellations and changes.

Telephone care and same day access for urgent care walk-in patients have been enhanced so that we may provide better service to you. Veterans who have used our Telephone Advice Program (888-838-6256, option 4) are very satisfied and find it can often save an unnecessary trip to our clinics. ACA is currently being used in primary care clinics and the eye clinic.

San Francisco VA Medical Center (SfVAMC): Putting veterans first

SfVAMC is committed to improving veterans' access to health care through the use of Advanced Clinic Access (ACA). The most important change for patients is that they won't be given a primary care appointment for more than 30 days into the future, and they will receive

cards reminding them to call for appointments. All SfVAMC primary care clinics, from Eureka to San Francisco, will change to ACA

scheduling during the next few months. Our clinic staff is ready for this improvement and will answer patient calls in a timely manner.

Veterans also play a major role in ACA by helping maximize what is done during medical appointments. Veterans should be on time, bring a list of current medications, write down medical questions in advance, use the mail-in prescription program and if unable to keep an appointment, cancel in advance. Our Telephone Linked Care toll-free number is (800) 733-0502.

VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCs): New programs implemented

In an effort to improve open access scheduling for veterans, VAPAHCs implemented a Patient Scheduling Unit (PSU) and a Patient Orientation Program. The PSU is established at the VA Monterey Clinic and VA San Jose Clinic, and will begin at the VA Stockton Clinic in October 2003. Prior to the PSU, veterans routinely booked their next appointment before leaving, which in many cases was several months out. Veterans now receive a letter one week prior to their visit asking them to contact the PSU and establish an appointment based on the availability of their schedule. The PSU has reduced the no-show rate and this service

will expand to the remaining clinics and at the Palo Alto, Menlo Park and Livermore Divisions.

The new Patient Orientation Program provides an overview of the health care system and what is expected of veterans as they access care. Established in October 2002, more than 1,800 veterans have participated in the program. Veterans receive an orientation on Telephone Care, how to access the Pharmacy, Business Office procedures, and what to expect at their first General Medical Clinic appointment. Veterans and staff applaud the Patient Orientation Program. The Telephone Care toll-free number is (800) 455-0057.

Age the moment we are born, and throughout our lives the effects of aging are evident in our bodies. Up to about age 20, the most visually prominent effects of aging are in growth and development. Beginning in our 20s, the effects of aging begin to be visible in the skin.

Aging Skin

As skin becomes less elastic, it also becomes drier. Underlying fat padding begins to disappear. With loss of underlying support by fat padding and connective tissues, the skin begins to sag. It looks less supple, and wrinkles form. The skin may be itchy with increased dryness. A cut may heal more slowly.

At the same time, the process of photoaging may be taking place. Photoaging is the effect of chronic and excessive sun exposure on the skin. Cigarette smoking also contributes to aging effects by the biochemical changes it brings about in skin tissues.

Photoaging may be responsible for the majority of age-associated changes in the skin's appearance: mottled pigmentation, surface roughness, fine wrinkles, "age" or "liver" spots and dilated blood vessels.

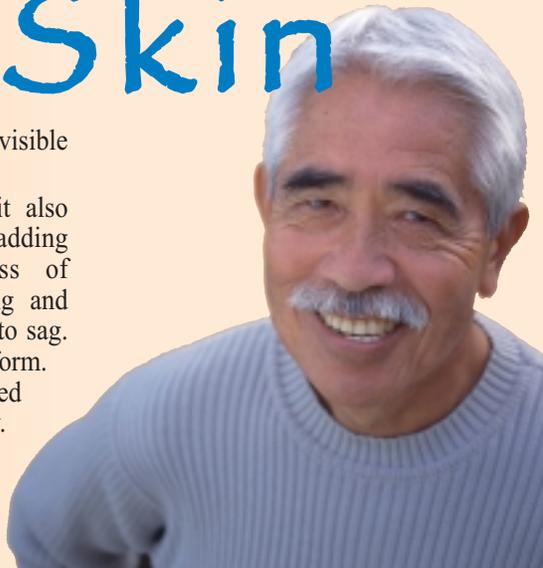
Skin diseases more common in older people include shingles, leg ulcers, and seborrheic dermatitis. As skin ages and accumulates sun damage, a number of lesions (sores or spots on the skin) become more common. These include:

"Age" or "liver" spots - flat, brown areas with rounded edges usually found on the face, hands, back and feet. They are age-related and photoaging-related, and have nothing to do with the liver. While they are unsightly, they are not dangerous. However, a large, flat dark area with irregular borders should be examined by a dermatologist to make sure it is not melanoma.

Actinic keratoses - thick, warty, rough, reddish growths on sun-exposed areas of the skin.

Broken capillaries - dilated facial blood vessels, usually related to sun damage.

Bruising - often a result of skin having lost its fat padding and becoming more susceptible to injury. Some drugs may cause bleeding under the skin.



Cherry angiomas - harmless, small bright red domes created by dilated blood vessels. They occur in more than 85 percent of middle-aged to elderly people, usually on the body.

Leg ulcers - A venous skin ulcer is a shallow wound that typically develops on either side of the lower leg, above the ankle and below the calf. Venous skin ulcers develop when blood pools in the lower leg veins, eventually leading to tissue breakdown. This pooling problem is usually a result of the veins' inability to move blood back toward the heart. Less frequently, blocked veins are a contributing factor.

Seborrheic keratoses - brown or black raised spots, or wart-like growths that appear to be stuck to the skin's surface. They are not cancerous or precancerous, and are easily removed.

Seborrheic dermatitis - greasy, yellowish scales on the scalp and eyebrows, behind the ears, and around the nose

Shingles - viral infection of the nerve roots that typically results in pain and rash. It is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Shingles occurs as a result of reactivation of the virus in a person who has already had chickenpox.

Wrinkles - changes in the elastic tissue from exposure to sunlight, effects of gravity, or motion factors in the skin.

Courtesy of American Academy of Dermatology



TIPS

The VA Sierra Pacific Network continuously strives to ensure that our patients receive the highest quality health care services available. We maintain and monitor rigorous quality and patient safety standards to help reduce the risk of medical errors.

Research indicates that most medical errors result from problems created by today's complex health care systems. But, errors also happen when doctors and their patients have problems communicating.

The VA Sierra Pacific Network offers the following tips to help reduce the risk of medical errors:



to Help Prevent Medical Errors

Be an informed consumer

Patients are less likely to follow their health care provider's instruction or do what is necessary to make the treatment work if they are uninvolved or uninformed. The more information you have the better able you are to help prevent errors and take care of yourself.

You have a right to ask your health care providers about your illness and medications. And, you have a right to expect answers. Your health care providers work hard to keep you healthy, but you are also responsible. Ask for printed material on your medications and your illness so you will

Other Steps You Can Take

The single most important way you can help to prevent errors is to be an active member of your health care team.

- ✓ Speak up if you have questions or concerns.
- ✓ Make sure that someone, such as your primary health care provider, is in charge of your care.
- ✓ To ensure proper identification and treatment, provide your full name, birth date and important health information, such as your health history and allergies, to all health care professionals involved in your care.
- ✓ Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and to be your advocate (someone who can help get things done and speak up for you if you can't).
- ✓ Remember that "more" is not always better. It is a good idea to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it can help you. You could be better off without it.
- ✓ If you have a test, don't assume that no news is good news. Ask about the results.

Expect answers ... it's your life and your health.

have something to refer to when you get home.

Hospital stays

If you are in a hospital, consider asking all health care workers who have direct contact with you whether they have washed their hands. This will help prevent the spread of infection.

Do not let anyone give you medications without first checking your hospital ID bracelet. This can help to prevent you from getting someone else's medications.

Look at all medicines before you take them. If it doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It might be a generic medication, or it might be the wrong medication. Ask the same questions you would ask if you were at the pharmacy.

When you are discharged from the hospital, ask your health care provider to explain the treatment plan you will use at home.

Medications

Make sure your health care provider knows about any allergies and adverse reactions that you have had to medicines.

Be sure you know what is being prescribed for you. Your health care provider or pharmacist can provide additional information on your medications, including information about possible side effects.

Our health care providers enter your prescriptions electronically and transmit them directly to the pharmacy. This helps to ensure the accuracy of your prescription. However, if you do receive a written prescription, be sure you can read it.

Ask for information about your medicines in terms you can understand - both when your medicines are prescribed and when you receive them.

- ✓ What is the medicine for?
- ✓ How am I supposed to take it and for how long?
- ✓ What side effects are likely? What do I do if they occur?
- ✓ Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements I am taking?
- ✓ What food, drink, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?

If you have any questions about the directions on your medicine labels, ask the pharmacy staff or your health care provider.

Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure your liquid medicine. Also, if you are not sure how to use measuring devices, ask for instructions.

Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.

ORAL HEALTH CARE

Recent surveys show that 90 percent of adults have, on average, 23.5 teeth. Almost a third of adults have all 28 teeth, and 50 percent age 55 and older wear partial or complete dentures. But whether caring for original teeth or dentures, seniors face a range of special oral concerns, including root decay and periodontal disease. You can keep your smile healthy by following a routine of proper oral care and making regular visits to your dentist.

Among other benefits, daily brushing and flossing protect older smiles from two common problems associated with getting older: Root decay, a condition where great amounts of root surfaces are

exposed; and tooth decay, which is caused by the weakening or chipping of older fillings.

Denture care and cleaning

Dentures - full or partial - should be brushed daily with a soft toothbrush or denture cleaning brush, using a commercially prepared denture powder or paste, hand soap, or baking soda. Toxic or abrasive household cleaners should never be used. Dentures should be brushed inside and outside, and rinsed with cool water.

Remaining natural teeth and gums, especially those teeth supporting a partial denture, should also be brushed.

When not in use, dentures should be covered with water or a denture cleaning solution to prevent drying.

Nutrition

At any age, a complete oral health home program includes sound nutritional habits. Many of the foods that help your body build strong muscles and bones also help build strong, healthy teeth and gums.

Dairy products provide calcium and vitamin D for strengthening teeth and bones. Breads and cereals supply B vitamins for growth and iron for healthy blood, which in turn contributes to healthy gum tissue. Fruits and vegetables containing vitamin C are essential to maintaining healthy gums.

Lean meat, fish, poultry and beans provide iron and protein for overall good health, as well as magnesium and zinc for teeth and bones.



Caught without a toothbrush?

If you're worried about your breath when your toothbrush isn't available, don't rely on sugar-coated candies or alcohol-laden mouth rinses that can cause more harm than good. Use products that are sugarless and alcohol-free and contain antibacterial agents noted for their effectiveness at controlling bad breath, which is also known as oral malodor or halitosis. Other tips for keeping your breath fresh include:

-  Rinsing your mouth with water after eating if you aren't able to brush
-  Chewing a piece of sugarless gum to stimulate saliva flow - nature's own cleanser
-  Snacking on celery, carrots, or apples; they tend to clear away loose food and debris during the chewing process
-  Eating a balanced diet. A vitamin deficiency may contribute to gum disease and bad breath.

Courtesy American Dental Hygienists' Association



Grave Marker

Requests Made Easier

On December 27, 2001, President Bush signed Public Law 107-103, the Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001.

This law includes a provision that allows the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to furnish an appropriate headstone or marker for the graves of eligible veterans buried in private cemeteries, whose deaths occur on or after September 11, 2001, regardless of whether the grave is already marked with a non-government marker.

This new provision is codified at 38 U.S.C. § 2306(d).

The VA has revised its application form to make requesting a VA grave marker easier. The new form, Application for Standard Government Headstone or Marker (VA Form 40-1330), includes updated information about changes that expand eligibility for a government marker. The new form and instruction sheets also permit better communication between VA and veterans' families.

For deaths on or after September 11, 2001, Public Laws 107-103 and 107-330 made government markers available for use on veterans' graves that were already marked with privately furnished headstones or markers. Previous law prevented VA from furnishing markers when a grave was already marked.

The laws require the VA Secretary to report to Congress by Feb. 1, 2006, on the effectiveness of this benefit and to recommend whether it should continue.

One of the changes made to the application form will allow VA to report on this new benefit by tracking its use.

VA has a toll-free fax service for submitting applications. This service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as an alternative to regular mail. Instructions, as well as the fax number, 1-800-455-7143, are on the VA Web site at www.cem.va.gov. The application form on the Web site can be filled in and printed for submitting by mail or fax. Questions about a headstone or marker application can be directed to VA's Memorial Programs Service applicant assistance unit at 1-800-697-6947.

VA handles more than 1,000 requests daily for veterans' markers. Last year, more than 348,000 headstones and markers were furnished for veterans' graves worldwide, generally within 60 days of VA receiving the application.

VA MEDICAL CENTER SAN FRANCISCO

4150 Clement Street
San Francisco, CA 94121-1598
(415) 221-4810

VA EUREKA OPC

714 F Street
Eureka, CA 95501
(707) 442-5335

VA SANTA ROSA OPC

3315 Chanate Road
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
(707) 570-3855

VA 13TH & MISSION CLINIC

205 13th Street, Suite 2150
San Francisco, CA 94103
(415) 551-7300

VA UKIAH OPC

238B Hospital Drive
Ukiah, CA 95482
(707) 468-1870

VA PALO ALTO HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

3801 Miranda Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94304-1290
(650) 493-5000

VA MENLO PARK DIVISION

795 Willow Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025
(650) 493-5000

VA LIVERMORE DIVISION

4951 Arroyo Road
Livermore, CA 94550
(925) 373-4700

VA CAPITOLA OPC

1350 N. 41st Street, Suite 102
Capitola, CA 95010
(831) 464-5519

VA STOCKTON OPC

500 W. Hospital Road
Stockton, CA 95231
(209) 946-3400

VA MODESTO OPC

1524 McHenry Blvd., Suite 315
Modesto, CA 95350
(209) 557-6200

VA MONTEREY OPC

3401 Engineer Lane
Seaside, CA 93955
(831) 883-3800

VA SAN JOSE OPC

80 Great Oaks Boulevard
San Jose, CA 95119
(408) 363-3011

VA SONORA OPC

19747 Gremley Road
Sonora, CA 95370
(209) 588-2600

VA NORTHERN CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

VA MARTINEZ OPC

150 Muir Road
Martinez, CA 94553
(925) 372-2000

VA MEDICAL CENTER SACRAMENTO

10535 Hospital Way
Mather, CA 95655-1200
(916) 366-5366

VA REDDING OPC

351 Hartnell Avenue
Redding, CA 96002
(530) 226-7555

VA CHICO OPC

280 Cohasset Road
Chico, CA 95926
(530) 879-5000

VA SACRAMENTO OPC

5342 Dudley Boulevard
McClellan Park, CA 95652-1074
(916) 561-7400

VA MARE ISLAND OPC

201 Walnut Avenue
Mare Island, CA 94592
(707) 562-8200

OAKLAND MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Oakland Army Base
2505 West 14th Street
Oakland, CA 94607
(510) 587-3400

VA OAKLAND OPC

2221 Martin Luther King Jr. Way
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 267-7800

VA FAIRFIELD OPC

103 Bodin Circle
Travis AFB, CA 94535
(707) 437-1800

VA CENTRAL CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

2615 E. Clinton Avenue
Fresno, CA 93703-2286
(559) 225-6100

VA SOUTH VALLEY OPC

1050 North Cherry Street
Tulare, CA 93274
(559) 684-8703

VA CASTLE OPC

3605 Hospital Road, Suite D
Atwater, CA 95301-5140
(209) 381-0105

VA SIERRA NEVADA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

1000 Locust Street
Reno, NV 89502-2597
(775) 786-7200

VA SIERRA FOOTHILLS OPC

3123 Professional Drive, Suite 250
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-0872

VA CARSON VALLEY OPC

925 Ironwood Drive, Suite 2102
Minden, NV 89423
(888) 838-6256

VA PACIFIC ISLANDS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

459 Patterson Road
Honolulu, HI 96819
(808) 433-1000



VA HILO PTSD RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

891 Ululani Street
Hilo, HI 96720
(808) 969-1684

VA MAUI OPC

203 Ho'ohana Street, Suite 300
Kahului, HI 96732
(808) 871-2454

VA HILO OPC

1285 Waiuanue Avenue, Suite 211
Hilo, HI 96720
(808) 935-3781

VA KONA OPC

75-5995 Kuakini Highway, Suite 413
Kailua-Kona, HI 96740
(808) 329-0774

VA KAUAI OPC

3367 Kuhio Highway, Suite 200
Lihue, HI 96766
(808) 246-0497

VA GUAM CLINIC

US Naval Hospital
313 Farenholt Road
Agana Heights, GU 96919
(671) 472-7250

VA REGIONAL OFFICE & OUTPATIENT CENTER MANILA

United States Department of
Veterans Affairs
PSC 501
FPO AP, 96515-1100
(011) 632-523-1001

Veterans' HealthMatters

Diana L. Struski, Editor
VA Sierra Pacific Network
201 Walnut Avenue
Mare Island, CA 94592

