

Veterans'

HealthMatters

Summer/Fall 2000

The Wellness
Magazine from the
VA Sierra Pacific
Network

Network Highlights

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Network

Highlights

Take a Look at Us Now!

I am proud to introduce a new section of *Veterans' HealthMatters*—Network Highlights. Many of you wrote to us and suggested that we expand the newsletter in order to provide information about local events and initiatives. Therefore, we have expanded *Veterans'*

HealthMatters to eight pages. We plan to devote several pages of each issue to highlight significant activities and accomplishments at every medical center and health care system. I encourage you to send us suggestions for other topics. I look forward to hearing from you.

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

VA Central California Health Care System (VACCHCS) Fresno: Celebrating the Past and Looking Ahead

On April 7, VA Fresno proudly celebrated 50 years of serving veterans in Central California. In a ceremony attended by several federal, state and local officials, speakers paralleled the expansion of a rich, agriculturally expanding community with the tremendous advances in VA medicine.

In September 1947, Victor "Transport" Maghakian, the Valley's most decorated WWII hero, turned the first shovel, and over the five decades that followed, VA has become far more than just a hospital. New buildings, such as a three-story medical education building, a

four-story ambulatory care building and a 60-bed geriatrics extended care facility, together with state-of-the-art technologies, have made it possible for VA to offer veterans excellence in health care.

Also on April 7, groundbreaking ceremonies were held for a new Community Outpatient Clinic scheduled for completion in December 2000 in Tulare, California.

VA Medical Center San Francisco (SFVAMC): Providing Quality Health Care for Veterans

SFVAMC is a nationally recognized, fully accredited center of quality health care that offers state-of-the-art care in four VA Centers of Excellence:

Cardiac Surgery, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), HIV Care and Home-Based Primary Care. SFVAMC is the national Center for the Surgical Treatment of Parkinson's Disease and is also a national center for hepatitis C treatment. SFVAMC offers a full range of outpatient and inpatient services and is currently remodeling the ambulatory surgical unit to provide veterans with the best in same-day surgery.

SFVAMC also offers many diverse clinical trials where veterans receive advanced clinical therapies and medications.

In addition to general and specialty services, SFVAMC offers outpatient care in San Francisco at 13th & Mission and at clinics in Santa Rosa,

Veterans' HealthMatters is intended to provide supplemental health information. Individuals should consult their primary care provider before pursuing any treatment alternatives. You may visit our web site at the following address: www.visn21.med.va.gov.

Eureka, Ukiah and Mare Island. Quality health care is what we are all about!

VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS): Building a Bright Future

On March 7, former VA Secretary Togo West joined the VANCHCS staff and Sacramento community to break ground for a new VA medical center at the former Mather Air Force Base. The new 55-bed facility is scheduled for completion in May 2002. Interim inpatient services are currently available in the existing Mather AFB Hospital. Construction is also under way on a new VA outpatient clinic at Travis Air Force Base, scheduled to open this fall. Also this fall, VANCHCS will assume ownership of the former McClellan AFB Clinic in Sacramento.

In addition to these new facilities, VANCHCS currently operates clinics in Martinez, Oakland, Sacramento, Mare Island, Redding and Chico, as well as the 120-bed Center for Rehabilitation and Extended Care in Martinez. Good health care may be closer than you think!

VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS): Bringing Care to Veterans Where They Live

Through partnering with various homeless shelters, soup kitchens, senior centers and other community organizations, VAPAHCS is making it easier for veterans to access

valuable care.

Over the past several months, VAPAHCS has taken health care on the road. The goal is to provide veterans with information on health care benefits and enrollment close to their homes or the places they frequent.

In May, the team attended two local American Indian Pow Wows, where 74 new veterans were enrolled. The team began providing screening clinics at homeless shelters, senior centers and other community events. The response to these services has been tremendous, largely because many of the veterans reached had been unable to benefit from VA care in the past.

These outreach events provide a renewed sense of purpose and realization of the VA mission—to serve the veteran.

In addition to outreach services, VAPAHCS currently operates campuses in Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Livermore, San Jose, Monterey, Capitola, Stockton and Modesto.

VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS) Reno: Improving Access and Service Delivery Is Job #1

VASNHCS serves veterans residing in a geographical area spanning 100,000 square miles. Veterans trying to get health care in this region are often challenged by distance, inclement weather, treacherous mountain passes, parking shortages, inaccessibility to medical records and, occasionally, unacceptable clinic wait-

ing times. To help resolve these issues, VASNHCS has planned and implemented improvements such as:

- community-based outpatient care
- homeless veterans outreach
- a patient log-in system
- a waits and delays project
- a computerized patient record system
- a parking reallocation project
- communication enhancements

VA Medical & Regional Office Center Honolulu: Graduating the 32nd Group of Combat Veterans

The Hilo-based Post Traumatic Stress Residential Rehabilitation Program (PRRP) graduated 12 combat veterans on May 9 from the Pacific Islands of Guam, Oahu, Maui, Kauai and Hawaii. Mr. Burge, Director of VAMROC Honolulu, attended the graduation, along with past PRRP graduates from Oahu, Hawaii and Kauai. Also in attendance were the Big Island Veterans Association President and Vet Center Team leaders from Maui and the Big Island. The veterans were given certificates of completion and plaques donated by a Maui veteran. The Hilo community provided songs and much Aloha. Showing their appreciation, the PRRP graduates prepared a meal for the guests.

This graduation marked the completion of the 32nd group of combat veterans who have completed the Hilo PRRP, which now numbers more than 300 graduates. ★

Get Hooked On Fitness

If you've heard it once, you've heard it a hundred times: Regular physical activity is one of the best favors you can do for your mind and body. Why, then, are so many of us spending our leisure time lounging instead of lunging? And feeling guilty instead of great? One explanation: It's tough to find the motivation to get moving. Why not start by considering all that exercise has to offer?

Just a few of the benefits

Better weight management. By building muscle, you'll burn more calories even at rest, which will help you minimize weight gain.

Protection against heart disease. The physically fit are eight times less likely to die from heart attacks or strokes. Working out also lowers a person's risk of high blood pressure by as much as half.

Stress control. It's funny how tension tends to evaporate along with sweat.

That's an important boon when you consider that stress is linked to insomnia, heart disease, headaches, back pain, colitis and a host of other ills.

The physically fit are eight times less likely to die from heart attacks or strokes.

Stronger bones. If you walk, run or do other weight-bearing exercises, you'll help maintain healthy bone density.

Happiness! Exercise activates the release of endorphins, brain chemicals that produce a special sense of well-being.

Strengthen your commitment

Set measurable and realistic goals,

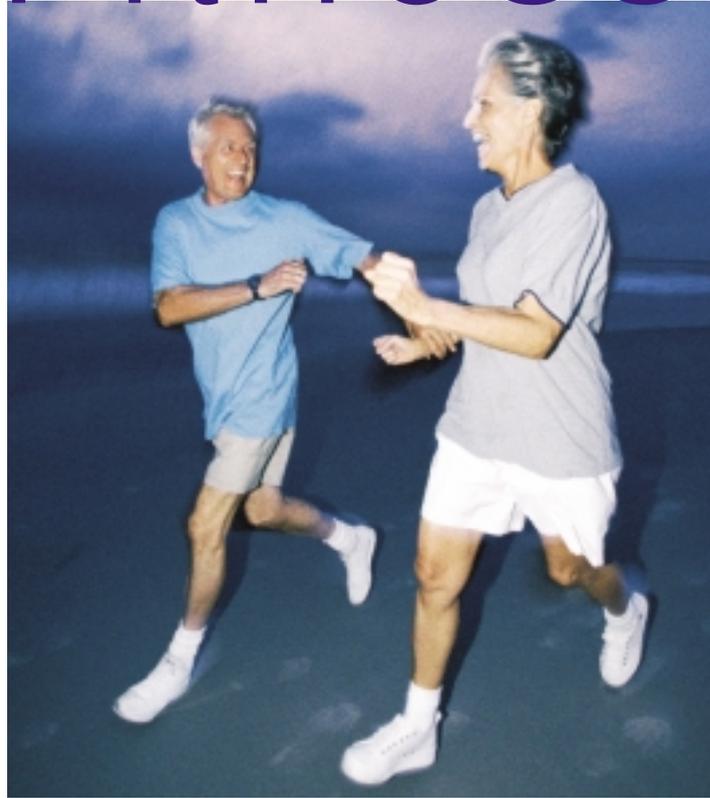
such as "I'm going to exercise at least three times a week."

Make exercise plans stick

by writing them down and telling someone about them.

Find a fitness buddy. You can encourage each other on days when exercise feels like a chore.

Try out different forms of exercise until you find something you like. Remember, exercise doesn't have to be strenuous. Try taking three 10-minute walks on most



days of the week. Spend some time in the garden. March in place while you watch your favorite game show. Experiment with some low-impact exercise videos. Take a dance class. Make a habit of taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

Don't try too much too soon. Start with 10 minutes of exercise and build up to 30.

When you reach a goal, reward yourself! You deserve it!

Note: Remember to get your VA health care provider's approval before starting a program of physical activity. ★

Beating the Allergies of Summer and Fall

For most, summer and fall are times for long walks in the park, frolicking on the playground and working in the yard. But for the millions of people allergic to pollen, insect stings and some types of plants, it's also a time for sniffing, scratching, sneezing and wheezing.



For these people, knowing how to avoid certain hazards can mean the difference between seasons of splendor and seasons of suffering.

When pollen is in the air

More than 14 million Americans suffer from hay fever, an allergic reaction to pollen released into the air by trees, grass and ragweed. When inhaled by an allergic person, these microscopic grains cause sneezing, coughing, a runny nose, itchy eyes and congestion.

Tree pollen is often the cause of early spring hay fever, while grass pollen is released into the air in early summer. But because sufferers may be allergic to more than one type of pollen, they might be miserable all summer and well into fall.

Out of harm's way

The best defense is to avoid pollen. Limit outdoor activities during the morning, when pollen is generally released by plants, and on windy days, when it's blown around. You may want to stay inside when pollen counts are highest.

In addition, these precautions can help make

summer and fall more enjoyable for allergy sufferers:

- Keep home and car windows closed as much as possible.
- Avoid mowing the lawn, which can stir up pollen and mold.
- Don't hang sheets and clothes out to dry since pollen may collect on them.
- If possible, take a vacation to a low-pollen spot, like a beach, during the height of the pollen season.
- Avoid smoke and smoky environments, which can aggravate symptoms.

Over-the-counter antihistamines and nasal sprays offer temporary relief from hay fever symptoms. People with severe reactions should see their VA health care provider, who may prescribe more powerful medications or recommend regular allergy shots or an inhaler. ★

Flu Season Is Fast Approaching: Get Protected!

A simple shot in the arm each fall is your best protection against influenza, or the flu, a respiratory infection that causes high fever, muscle aches, headaches and more. But more important, the flu can lead to more serious illnesses, such as pneumonia. Contact your VA health care provider for a flu shot if you:

- are age 50 or older
- have a chronic medical problem, such as heart disease, asthma or kidney disease
- work in a health care profession
- have a compromised immune system due to HIV, cancer, an organ transplant or other similar condition

Stopping Cancer Before It Starts



Did you know that wise, everyday choices may be your best weapon yet in the war against cancer? To begin launching your personal attack, read this article and then make an appointment with your VA health care provider to discuss your risk factors.

Start with a healthy diet.

People whose diets are low in saturated fat and packed with fruits, vegetables and whole grains appear to have a reduced cancer risk.

Here's a look at what researchers have discovered:

- Oatmeal, brown rice and whole-grain cereals and breads have been tied to a reduced risk of colon, rectal, stomach, breast and pancreatic cancers.
- Lycopene, a phytochemical found in cooked tomatoes, can lower the incidence of prostate cancer.
- A diet high in fruits, vegetables and fiber may decrease the risk of cancers in the gastrointestinal and respiratory tract.

Put out a smoking habit. One-third of all cancer cases are caused by tobacco (in any



form). Cutting tobacco out of your life, including secondhand smoke, dramatically decreases your risk of lung, oral and stomach cancers.

Drink in moderation. Women who have more than one alcoholic drink a day increase their breast cancer risk by 25 percent. And keep in mind that if you smoke and drink, you double your chance of esophageal cancer and increase your risk of cancers of the mouth, throat and larynx.

Get active. Physical activity can cut a person's risk for colon cancer in half and may also help lower a person's risk for breast or prostate cancer. Exercise fights cancer by helping people control their weight. Being overweight is associated

with a higher risk for uterine, breast, colon and gallbladder cancers.

Stay in the shade. To lower your risk of skin cancer, avoid the sun from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., when the sun's rays are at their strongest. Apply sunscreen with SPF protection of at least 15 to exposed areas.



Talk to your VA health care provider.

Your age, your family cancer history, whether you are a man or a woman and other factors contribute to your unique cancer-risk profile. Only you and your doctor can devise the cancer-prevention plan that will work best for you. ★

Put Cancer Detection into Your Own Hands

Self-exams are an important detection tool. Monthly breast, testicular and skin self-exams can alert you to lumps, discolorations or discharges that require medical attention. If you are unsure how to perform a self-test, ask your health care provider for a demonstration. Don't let the fear of finding a lump or other sign of cancer deter you from doing a self-test. Although many lumps are not cancerous, all should be examined by your doctor. Remember, early detection is the key to effective and possibly lifesaving treatment.

VA:

A Leader in Patient Safety

The safety and well-being of patients is of utmost concern to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA has taken a national leadership role in patient safety by launching initiatives designed to identify problems in the system and develop solutions to make it even better.

“Our veterans have earned the best and safest care that this nation can provide,” former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., said. “At VA, we’re committed to an unending search to provide better health care for more veterans and their families.”

Exemplifying this commitment at the national level are the following initiatives:

The National Center for Patient Safety (NCPS). VA created the NCPS to analyze reports of medical mistakes. The goal is to identify patterns and trends and suggest corrective actions. Lessons learned are spread throughout the VA health care system, and national training in “root cause analysis”—a system for studying medical errors—is provided to all VA health care employees. NCPS is currently collaborating with VISN 21 experts on a national employee survey designed to identify areas of improvement.

Bar Code Medication

Administration. VA is now the first health system to use bar coding nationwide. The bar code system ensures that the right medication is given to the right patients at the right time, a strategy that is expected to cut medication errors by two-thirds. Handheld scanners compare bar codes on the medication with bar codes on the patient’s wrist and with the provider’s orders. Additionally, outpatient prescriptions are refilled by automated systems with extremely low rates of error.

National Surgical Quality Improvement Program (NSQIP)

VA created the NSQIP to provide systematic insight into surgical care and to enhance surgical outcomes. Such studies indicate VA has a record regarding postoperative deaths and complications that is in most cases better than non-VA surgical programs.

Clinical Practice Guidelines.

VA has been one of the nation’s most successful health care organizations in systematically changing clinical practice to ensure that the right care is provided. Practice guidelines bring the best

scientific evidence to day-to-day practice, helping to reduce unfavorable variations in care.

Computerized Patient Record (CPR). VA uses advanced technology, such as one of the nation’s most sophisticated health care computer systems, to support patient safety.

Computerized medical records remind providers and clinicians to give medications, perform preventive screenings and other medical interventions and provide patient education.

Simulation-Based Training at VA Palo Alto Health Care

System. VA has created a simulation-based curriculum for anesthesiology involving highly realistic scenarios that require complex decision making and interaction with other personnel. A videotape of

the simulated session is later analyzed as a helpful training tool.

At the network level, initiatives include patient safety education for all employees. The purpose of the classes is to foster a culture where safety is the primary focus of all employees. To create an environment that is safer for all patients, employees will receive training that is directly relevant to their jobs. ★



VA has taken a leadership role in patient safety by launching several important initiatives.

Where to find us!

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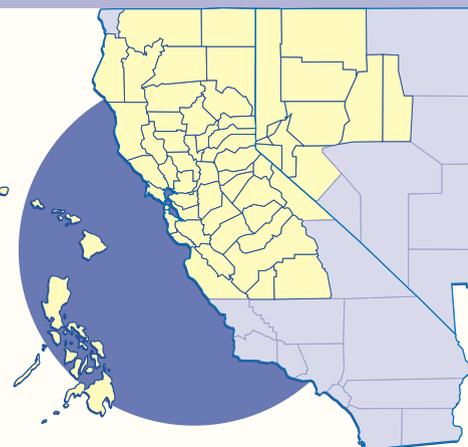
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