

FALL 2009

Veterans' Health

*Your key to
better health
in the Midwest*

The Flu: Be
Aware, Be
Vaccinated,
and Be Well

Changes at VA

Coralville
Women's Clinic





Cindy Breyfogle, Acting Director

Message from the Director

VA—Tailored to Fit Veterans' Needs

Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) Eric K. Shinseki has set high standards for the VA, highlighting a commitment to eliminating homelessness, improving access for Veterans, and reducing backlogs of applications for benefits.

Cindy Breyfogle, Acting Director of the VA Midwest Healthcare Network, reaffirms this dedication to meeting the needs of Veterans. Breyfogle is also aware that the Veteran population—once only thought of as males over the age of 65—is changing, and wants to make sure that VA health care continues to “hit the mark” in providing the services to best meet *all* Veterans’ needs.

One of the changes is the growing number of women in the military. Today, approximately 15 percent of service members are women. “The issue of women in the military really resonates with me,” says Breyfogle, “and seeing women come back from combat into the VA makes me very committed to providing the maximum amount of care for them. For instance, we have full-time Women Veterans Program Managers at all eight of our Network’s facilities.”

Last year, approximately 18,500 women Veterans in our network received VA care, representing about five percent of our workload. “It’s not a really large number right now,” notes Breyfogle, “but the number of women receiving VA care will continue to grow with the increasing number of women in the military. Accordingly, women have different needs and require different types of care, and we want to be able to provide that care for them. This issue of *Veterans’ Health* features the Women’s Health Care Clinic in Coralville, Iowa, where women Veterans can have gender-specific issues addressed—an example of how the network is meeting the special needs of women veterans.”

Also in this issue, VA emphasizes being prepared for flu season. According to Breyfogle, personal prevention is important for everyone. “Wash your hands, cover your sneezes, get the flu shot, and stay home if you have the flu,” she says. “With H1N1 it’s important to be prepared, especially if you’re around children or grandchildren.” Find out more about dates and times for flu clinics at www.visn23.med.va.gov.

Be an active partner in your health care. If you’re not yet enrolled, visit your nearest VA facility to find out how VA can meet your needs—it’s *our* honor to serve *you*.

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The Research Health section of My HealtheVet is where you can get health information, research a topic, and simply learn more about your health. Read about common conditions and VA health programs. Get answers to your health questions from

three vast medical resources. My HealtheVet makes it easy to stay informed by bringing a wealth of information right to your fingertips.

For more information, visit www.myhealth.va.gov and click on Research Health.



Veterans’ Health is published quarterly as a patient education service by VA Midwest Health Care Network, 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 Flu:

Be Aware and Be Well

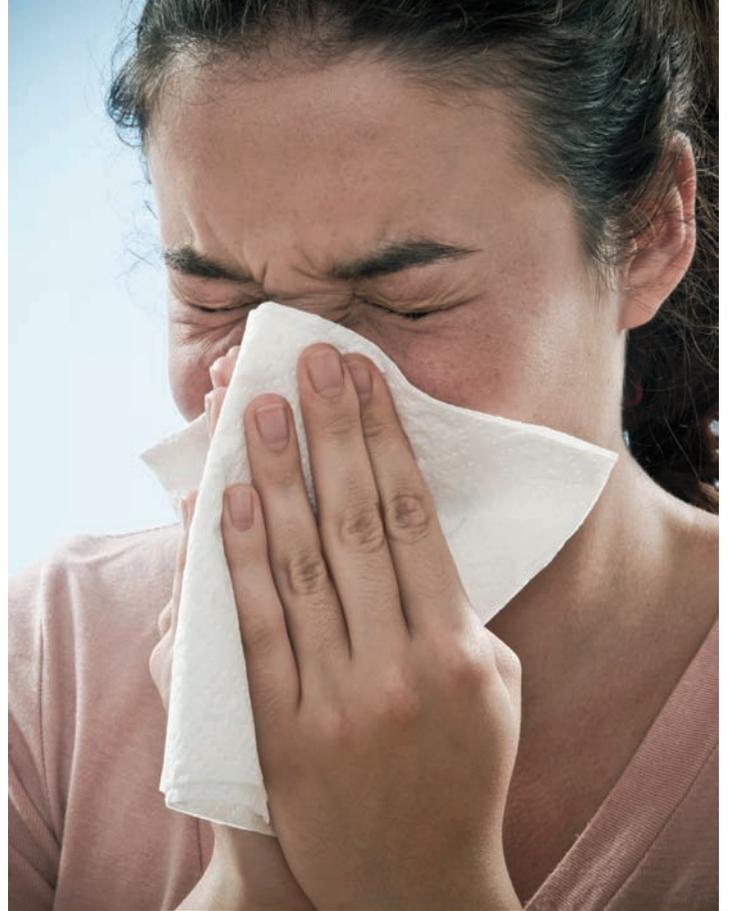
Fall brings the beauty of changing leaves and the comfort of cooler temperatures. Unfortunately, it also signals the start of something not so pleasant—flu season.

This fall, the VA and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are preparing for new challenges. With the spread of the H1N1 flu (formerly “swine flu”), there is concern of illness more severe than with seasonal flu, which hospitalizes approximately 200,000 people each year.

According to Kathleen De Roos, Infection Prevention Manager, young people (under 25 years old) are particularly at risk of catching H1N1—only 13 percent of cases so far have struck people over age 65. But regardless of age, it is extremely important to take measures to stay well and prevent the spread of flu to others. Seasonal flu vaccine became available at your local VA early this fall. **Check with your local VA to see if seasonal flu vaccine is still available.** The H1N1 flu vaccine is being delivered to States and some VAs now, but may not be available to everyone right away. “Flu vaccines are safe, quick and effective,” said De Roos. “The virus is less likely to spread to your loved ones if you prevent yourself from getting sick,” she said.

In addition to being vaccinated, De Roos suggests washing your hands often, sneezing or coughing into your sleeve, and avoiding others who are coughing and sneezing. “If you’re within six feet of a person with H1N1, you can get sick from droplets that spread through the air,” she explains.

Flu symptoms (both seasonal and H1N1) include a sudden onset of fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy



Flu Shot Facts

- Flu vaccine shots no longer contain live virus.
- You cannot get the flu from a flu shot.
- The flu shot is approved for pregnant women, but the nasal-spray flu vaccine is not.

Warning:

If you are watching children or grandchildren who have the flu or flu symptoms (or any viral infection), be careful not to give them aspirin because of the risk of Reye’s syndrome (swelling in the liver and brain). Check over-the-counter medicines to see if they contain aspirin before giving to kids under age 18.

nose, muscle aches, headache, chills, and extreme fatigue. With H1N1 flu, vomiting and/or diarrhea symptoms have been reported in both adults and children.

Home is the safest place to be if flu symptoms are not severe. For information concerning when to seek care for flu or caring for someone at home with flu, call the VISN toll free number: 1-888-686-0479. De Roos adds that it takes about a week to stop being contagious. “A person could look and feel well but should still stay home at least 24 hours after the fever subsides without the help of fever-reducing medicine,” she said.

Visit the VA public health information site at www.publichealth.va.gov for information about H1N1, seasonal flu, and much more.

VA Midwest Health Care Network

VISN 23

FLU PREVENTION

- Protect Yourself
- Protect Others
- Be Prepared

Flu Information and Education
Toll Free Number

1-888-686-0479





Changing Veteran Population Prompts **Changes at VA**

Debra Thilgen, RN, Women Veterans Program Manager, has been at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center for 25 years, so she knows firsthand about the exciting changes underway to accommodate the influx of female Veterans.

“It used to be that any woman who came to the VA was automatically considered somebody’s wife,” she says. “Now, about 15 percent of active duty military personnel are female, and some of these brave women are coming home and having babies!”

The increase in women patients has required VA health care professionals to change their perception of a “typical” Veteran. Doctors, nurses, and other personnel now participate in classes, workshops, and mini-residencies in women’s health to acquire the skills needed to care for women returning from combat.

“Privacy is a huge concern for women Veterans,” explains Thilgen, “because many have a mental health diagnosis or have experienced military sexual trauma. We must provide an environment where they are treated with respect, where their

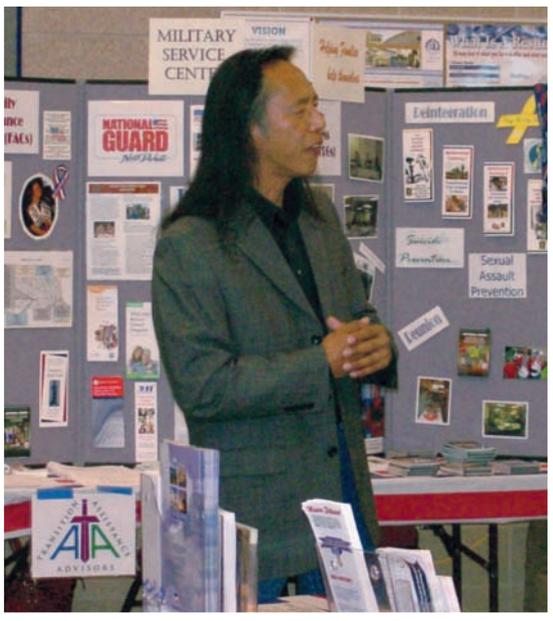
confidentiality is protected, and where they can form trusting relationships with their health care team. We want returning reserve units to enroll and begin establishing that bond right away.”

In addition to a point of contact for women at every community based outpatient clinic and a full-time Women Veterans Program Manager at every VA facility in the United States, regular outreach programs are conducted in the VA Midwest Health Care Network. One such event in Minneapolis, called “From Boot Camp to Veteran,” is popular because it combines education with entertainment. Last year, for example, an 87-year-old former WASP pilot from World War II spoke to active duty and young Veterans.



Becky Greene, Penny Hope, and Marilee Hagen enjoying the 2009 Women Veterans Conference in Sioux Falls.

In the not-too-distant past, the average Veteran was a male over the age of 65. Today, however, female Veterans are one of the fastest growing segments of the Veteran population, and the VA Midwest Health Care Network is working hard to meet their needs.



Ron His Horse Is Thunder, Chairman, Standing Rock Reservation, Ft. Yates, ND addresses the Benefits Fair prior to the Women's Health and Wellness Day program on May 6, 2009.

“Our Veterans deserve the very best care. Anything less is unacceptable. If we are to transform VA into a 21st century organization, we need to continually improve our services to women Veterans.”

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki

Other facilities in the region also host outstanding programs aimed at women Veterans. “VA staff in Fargo,” Thilgen says, “go to pow-wows on a nearby reservation and work very hard within the community to reach Native American women Veterans.”

Another sign of change at the VA is research aimed at women (see *Veterans Help VA with Research* on page 7). “Veterans are a critical part of research within VA,” says Thilgen. “For women, much of our research within the Network is centered on military sexual trauma, osteoporosis, and aging. We encourage our women Veterans to participate so that we can continue to provide the best available care.”

NEW DISEASES ASSOCIATED WITH **AGENT ORANGE**

On October 13, 2009 Secretary Shinseki established service-connection for Vietnam Veterans with B cell leukemias, such as hairy cell leukemia; Parkinson’s disease; and ischemic heart disease.

This is based on an independent study by the Institute of Medicine showing an association with exposure to Agent Orange. Vietnam Veterans with these diseases may be eligible for disability compensation and health care benefits.

Agent Orange is the name given to a specific blend of herbicides used in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971 during the Vietnam conflict. The U.S. military sprayed millions of gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides to remove leaves from trees that provided cover for enemy forces.

The following link has more information on this topic:

WWW.PUBLICHEALTH.VA.GOV/EXPOSURES/AGENTORANGE/

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VA Central Iowa Health Care System

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Sioux Falls, SD VA Medical Center

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605-336-3230, ext. 6024
or 6890

Coralville Women's Clinic

a "one stop shop" for
female Veterans

The Women's Health Care Clinic in Coralville, Iowa has become a very popular place with many of the area's female Veterans. According to Kirt Sickels, Public Relations Officer at the Iowa City VA Medical Center (VAMC), the clinic in Coralville is essentially a "one stop shop" where women can have gender-specific issues addressed, as well as have acute and chronic health care needs met.

"It has been very popular since opening in 2005," he explains, "because women Veterans can coordinate everything from primary care to mental health to family planning under one roof. They may have to go elsewhere for certain procedures, but it's more convenient to at least have everything coordinated from a central location." Sickels adds that female Veterans travel to the Coralville Women's Health Care Clinic from all of Iowa City's service area, which includes about the eastern one-third of Iowa and about 20 counties in western Illinois.

In addition to providing "one stop shop" health care for women, special health fairs and celebrations are held for women at Coralville and the Iowa City VAMC.

Women currently comprise approximately 14 percent of the active duty military, 17.6 percent of Guard and Reserves, and 5.9 percent of VA health care users. Sickels says those kinds of numbers made change at VA facilities a necessity.

"We're seeing more and more women coming in, and they are just as important as their male counterparts. A Veteran is a Veteran regardless of gender, and we have a responsibility to take care of each of them."

Women Veterans seeking more information can telephone Kara Sedore, Iowa City Women Veterans Program Manager, at 319-338-0581, extension 3591.



Examples of the care coordinated and provided in the Coralville Women's Health Clinic include:

- ✓ Primary care
- ✓ Preventive health screening, including breast and cervical cancer screens
- ✓ Gender-specific care
- ✓ Reproductive health care (maternity and infertility)
- ✓ Osteoporosis evaluation and treatment
- ✓ Sexual trauma counseling
- ✓ PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) evaluation and treatment
- ✓ Substance abuse treatment
- ✓ Homeless services
- ✓ Vocational rehabilitation
- ✓ Cardiac fitness
- ✓ Nutrition and weight loss
- ✓ Family planning/contraceptives/tubal ligations
- ✓ Menopause management

Read more about how VA is accommodating our women Veterans at www.publichealth.va.gov/womenshealth

Veterans Help VA with Research

Providing the best care possible to our Veterans requires the efforts of many health care professionals, including VA investigators conducting research at VA facilities nationwide. VA ranks as one of the nation's leaders in health research, with thousands of studies conducted at VA medical centers, outpatient clinics, and nursing homes each year.

Researchers work to discover new therapies and develop new treatments, as well as to answer important questions, such as:

- ▶ What can you do to help prevent heart disease?
- ▶ If you suffered a stroke, what type of rehabilitation would be most effective?
- ▶ Does prostate cancer screening improve your chances for survival?

High quality health care research in VA is possible because of the cooperation of Veteran patients, which allows us to do research that contributes to the health of Veterans and the community at large.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- ▶ Current VA-sponsored clinical trials: www.ClinicalTrials.gov (search for trials by sponsor)
- ▶ Q&A on VA research: www.research.va.gov/programs/PRIDE/veterans/default.cfm
- ▶ VA research in the news: www.research.va.gov/news
- ▶ The VA Office of Research and Development home page: www.research.va.gov

TIPS FOR BETTER HEALTH

for Women

Making smart daily decisions can help reduce your risk for cancer, heart disease, stroke, and other health hazards. How do you do it? Here are some tips:

- Get regular check-ups, including Pap smears and mammograms, and ask your doctor what exams, tests, and vaccines you need at each stage of life.
- Read labels! Your favorite foods may not seem so appetizing when you know what they contain. For a healthy diet, cut back on salt (sodium), saturated fat, sugar, cholesterol, and alcohol—and eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Also, check serving sizes to avoid overeating.
- Aim for at least 2½ hours of exercise each week, and look for ways to incorporate activity into your lifestyle. For example, gardening provides a double benefit: you get exercise while growing vegetables that are good for you.
- Stimulate your mind by trying new things and taking part in social activities.
- Don't smoke! Smoking can contribute to heart disease, stroke, cancer, and other health issues. It may be difficult to quit, but eventually you'll be glad you did.
- Wear sunscreen every day to protect your skin and keep it looking younger.
- Know your body. Regularly look for anything unusual, like lumps or discolored moles that may need to be checked out.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask questions. Keep a list of health concerns to discuss with your health care provider during your next visit. You can also research more health tips through My HealthVet, the VA website for Veteran health benefits and services, at www.myhealth.va.gov.

If you know a female Veteran who would find the information in this issue of Veterans' Health helpful, please pass the publication along!

For more health tips,
visit the HealthierUS
Veterans website at:



www.healthierusveterans.va.gov/

VA MIDWEST HEALTH CARE NETWORK - VISN 23

NORTH DAKOTA

Fargo VA Medical Center

2101 N. Elm St.
Fargo, ND 58102
(701) 232-3241
(800) 410-9723

SOUTH DAKOTA

Sioux Falls VA Medical Center

2501 West 22nd St.
PO BOX 5046
Sioux Falls, SD 57117
(605) 336-3230
(800) 316-8387

VA Black Hills Health Care System

113 Comanche Road
Fort Meade, SD 57741
(605) 347-2511
(800) 743-1070
500 N. 5th Street
Hot Springs, SD 57747
(605) 745-2000
(800) 764-5370

NEBRASKA

VA Nebraska Western Iowa Health Care System

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Lincoln, NE 68510-2493
(402) 489-3802
(866) 851-6052

4101 Woolworth Avenue
Omaha, NE 68105
(402) 346-8800
(800) 451-5796

2201 North Broadwell Avenue
Grand Island, NE 68803
(308) 382-3660
(866) 580-1810

MINNESOTA

Minneapolis VA Medical Center

One Veterans Drive
Minneapolis, MN 55417
(612) 725-2000
(866) 414-5058

St. Cloud VA Medical Center

4801 Veterans Drive
St. Cloud, MN 56303
(320) 252-1670
(800) 247-1739

IOWA

Iowa City VA Medical Center

601 Hwy 6 West
Iowa City, IA 52246
(319) 338-0581
Illinois (800) 346-1843
Iowa (800) 637-0128

Central Iowa Health Care System

3600 - 30th St
Des Moines, IA 50310
(515) 699-5999
(800) 294-8387
1515 W. Pleasant St
Knoxville, IA 50138
(641) 842-3101
(800) 816-8878



www.visn23.va.gov



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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