

FALL/WINTER 2007

# Veterans' Health

*Your key to  
better health  
in the Midwest*

**A Lifeline for  
Veterans**

**Aaa-choo!**

**Falling Into Bad  
Habits This Season**

**Holiday Stress**



**A Home Away From Home**



## A HEALTHY STATE OF MIND



Dr. Robert Petzel

**E**ach fall, cloudy skies and cold weather seem to take their toll on our frame of mind. Combine a mood falling with the temperature along with stress from the approaching holidays, and the season doesn't always appear to be very merry.

"Mental health issues are an underappreciated health issue in this country," says Network Director Dr. Robert Petzel. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately one in four Americans (ages 18 years old and up) suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. To combat this problem, Petzel says "the Veterans Health Administration has one of the most extensive and broad mental health systems in the country, with a huge array of programs available for their patients." Furthermore, the VA has continued to broaden its reach by adding thousands of mental health physicians to its facilities over the last two and a half years.

Petzel wants veterans to recognize that the added strain during the holidays makes it especially important

for families to be sensitive to each other's needs. "Some families get together for perhaps the only time during the year," he says, "and underlying mental health issues may surface during the holiday period."

To stay healthy, individuals must pay attention to both emotional and physical needs. A good night's sleep, healthy diet, relaxation methods, and exercise can help a person cope with stress while at the same time keeping their body in good physical shape.

However, there are also more serious concerns associated with stress. "Chemical dependency and depression are two major issues that come out during the holiday season," says Petzel. It is helpful for families to be supportive of each other and know when outside help is needed. Petzel also adds, "Individual practitioners and caregivers are aware that this is a very difficult time for some patients with mental health problems. The VA has recently set up a national suicide hotline which has already been used extensively and is available to help veterans that have serious health issues." The hotline number is 1-800-273-TALK, and it is free and confidential. If you begin to feel overwhelmed this season, stop, take a deep breath, and don't worry—your local VA medical center will be there to help.

## Mansfield Becomes Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs

**O**n October 1, 2007, Gordon H. Mansfield began serving as Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Mansfield has served as Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs since January 2004. Prior to becoming Acting Secretary, Mr. Mansfield served as Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, VA's chief operating officer responsible for the delivery of benefits and health care earned by veterans of the U.S. armed forces. He assumed the role of Secretary under the terms of the Federal Vacancies Reform Act, where a Deputy Secretary begins to

serve as Acting Secretary immediately and automatically when the Secretary position becomes vacant.

The role of Secretary of Veterans Affairs is to act as the U.S. government's principal advocate for veterans and direct the nation's second largest Cabinet Department, responsible for a nationwide system of health care services, benefits programs, and national cemeteries for America's veterans and dependents. Mansfield will serve as Acting Secretary until another individual is nominated by the president and confirmed by the United States Senate. At the time of this release, Lt Gen James B. Peake (Ret), M.D., received President Bush's nomination for the department. If confirmed by the Senate, Dr. Peake will be the first general to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

## NEW WEBSITE!

**V**isit the new website VA has recently developed for veterans and VA employees to help them prevent disease and stay healthy. The website provides important information and numerous resources with new topics every month such as stress and tobacco use. Check it out!



[www.prevention.va.gov](http://www.prevention.va.gov)

*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.

# A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Each day, we are given choices—when to get up, what to wear, what to eat, where to go—but what if we no longer were given these choices? For those who are considering nursing home care, this can be a major concern. According to Kelly Schneider, Quality Oversight Manager for VISN 23 Extended Care and Rehabilitation, “Residents [of nursing homes] used to have limited choices in how they spent their day, and they had to conform to what the institution said they needed to do.” However, the times, they are a-changin’ and the VA is at the forefront of many exciting new initiatives.

The new model of nursing home care is called “culture transformation,” an initiative to create more home-like, resident centered care. Beyond the look and feel of the institution, this gives residents many daily options, empowering each resident to make choices about when they want to get up, eat, take a bath or shower, and go to bed. “This concept of care helps residents feel their individual needs are respected and honored,” said Schneider.

One notable addition being implemented is pet therapy, where pets are introduced to the nursing home environment as “residents.” At the Grand Island Division VA Nursing Home in Nebraska, a yellow Labrador named Quinn lives amongst the residents. According to Colleen Donovan, Chief of Extended Care and Rehabilitation at Grand Island, Quinn has been very helpful for residents who, along with socializing, assist in caring for him. “It’s not uncommon to see this big lab [Quinn] laying in the middle of the hallway with wheelchairs maneuvering around him,” said Donovan.



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If veterans and their families need to explore moving into a nursing home, Schneider and Donovan have several tips to make sure they choose the right facility.

- ✓ Visit the nursing home to take in the environment. Make sure it has a tidy, warm, and comfortable homelike feeling where resident rooms are individually decorated.
- ✓ Look for interaction between staff and residents. Staff should be welcoming, friendly, and maintain good eye contact.
- ✓ Stay during a meal. The dining process should be resident-centered with choices available and requests honored.
- ✓ Look for consistency in staffing. To create good relationships, the same people should be taking care of the residents each day.
- ✓ Observe activities. There should be creative choices available to accommodate different interests.

Finally, the staff should make sure all family concerns are addressed. Donovan reminds families that this will be their loved one’s new home and says, “It is so valuable to feel confident in the person putting your loved one to bed each night.”

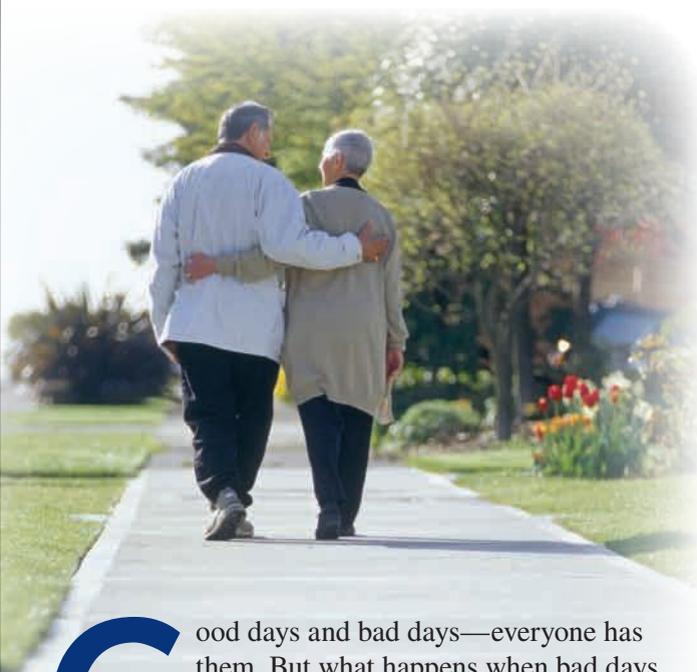
Left: Family rooms at the Grand Island Division VA Nursing Home in Nebraska have a home-like look and feel.



A veteran resident of Grand Island Division VA Nursing Home enjoys the company of Santa and Quinn, a yellow Labrador who lives with the residents.

# A Lifeline for Veterans

**National  
Suicide Hotline  
1-800-273-TALK  
(8255)**



**G**ood days and bad days—everyone has them. But what happens when bad days compound until you feel that you have just a bunch of lemons, and no sugar to make any lemonade? Unfortunately, not everyone has the ability to simply “get over” their bad days, and sometimes outside help is needed to make sure the situation doesn’t build to a dangerous level.

At the VA, suicide has developed into a growing concern. A suicide risk assessment prepared by the VA Mental Illness Research, Education, & Clinical Center (MIRECC) showed:

- ▶ Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for U.S. adults between 18 and 65.
- ▶ Every 16 minutes someone dies from suicide.

According to Dr. Brian Cook, Director of Medical Health Services at the Iowa VA Medical Center, “We’re trying to educate our patients about the importance of good mental health and emphasizing signs and symptoms of psychiatric disorders to encourage them [veterans] to seek treatment earlier. As a VA, we have adopted training

for primary care providers since they’re often the first and only contact a person may have with the medical system.”

Even though it already has the largest mental health program in the nation, the VA has recently added suicide prevention coordinators at each medical center. Pamela End of Horn, MSW/LICSW, Suicide Prevention Coordinator for the St. Cloud VA and VISN 23 Lead Suicide Prevention Coordinator, states, “One of the best things to happen within the VA was the creation of suicide prevention coordinators to identify and track high risk suicidal patients—to make sure they’re getting the services they not only need but also deserve.”

But how do you know when a friend or loved one needs help? If you think that something may be wrong, Ms. End of Horn advises to, “Don’t ignore it. Listen. Take it seriously and talk to someone about it.” The majority of suicide attempts relate to overwhelming feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, hopelessness, helplessness, or guilt. The following are also factors that can increase risk of suicidal tendencies:

- ☑ Mental disorders (Bipolar, schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, etc.)
- ☑ Chronic pain or serious physical illness
- ☑ Alcohol or drug abuse
- ☑ Unemployment and/or financial problems
- ☑ Death of a loved one
- ☑ Substantial relationship problems
- ☑ Emotional trauma that seems overwhelming

Fortunately, MIRECC reports that 75 percent of people considering suicide show signs to those around them that something is wrong. Here are warning signs to look for:

- ☑ Passive suicidal talk, such as “I would be better off dead” or “I can’t go on”
- ☑ Active suicidal talk, such as “I want to kill myself”
- ☑ Giving away personal possessions and putting affairs in order, such as a will
- ☑ Withdrawal from family and friends
- ☑ Loss of interest in religion
- ☑ Sudden impulsive behavior
- ☑ Obsession with death in music, poetry, etc.
- ☑ Increased alcohol or drug abuse
- ☑ Seeking access to weapons or other means

Regardless of the signs, trust your instincts. If you think that a friend or loved one is in danger, talk to them. Let them know of your concern and be open to what they have to say. “I think the first thing you can do is make sure not to leave the individual alone and make contact with a mental health provider,” says Dr. Cook. Be sure not to make judgments or write off the signs as attention seeking. “Let them know that things change and there’s always a reason to have hope,” says Ms. End of Horn. “They can feel better again, about life and about themselves, and can go on to lead happy, useful lives.”

New this year, the VA has established a 24-hour national suicide hotline. For free and confidential help, veterans can call the toll-free hotline (1-800-273-TALK) and be immediately connected to mental health professionals. Veterans can also contact their local VA Medical Center or Vet Center for in or out-patient treatment options. For more information about VA mental health programs, visit the website at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/).

Since its launch on  
July 21, 2007, more than  
**9,000**  
veterans have called the  
suicide hotline.



# TIPS FOR BETTER HEALTH *Mental*

- ▶ Take care of your physical health: exercise, eat healthy meals, and get enough sleep
- ▶ Don’t abuse drugs or alcohol
- ▶ Focus on the positive aspects of your life
- ▶ Think before you act and learn to control your emotions
- ▶ Express your feelings—don’t bottle up emotions until you explode
- ▶ Find balance in your life by managing stress and taking time to relax
- ▶ Don’t try to solve your problems alone
- ▶ If you feel alone, get connected with a group, healthcare professional, pastor, or someone you trust
- ▶ Be aware that mental health problems are very treatable
- ▶ Maintain friendships with people you can count on
- ▶ Laugh. A good laugh does wonders!
- ▶ Set goals and work towards them
- ▶ Make time for your hobbies and interests



For more health tips,  
visit the *HealthierUs*  
Veterans website at:



[www.healthierusveterans.va.gov/](http://www.healthierusveterans.va.gov/)

# Xaa-choo!

**G**esundheit! That's right, it's flu season again. If you're trying to avoid the coughing, sneezing, fever, headache, aches, and pains that come with the flu virus, read on to find out how you can stay healthy this year.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reminds us that "The single best way to protect against the flu is to get vaccinated each year." If you are enrolled in VA health care, you are eligible to get a flu vaccination from your nearest VA medical center. Dr. Kristin Nichol, chief of medicine at the VA Medical Center in Minneapolis, has conducted research showing that the flu vaccine decreases the risk of flu-related death in those over age 65 by 48 percent. "Many people fail to appreciate the serious complications of influenza," she said.

Additionally, good habits can help you to protect yourself and others from the flu. The main way the flu

spreads is through person-to-person contact. The following are tips from the CDC to help stay virus-free:

- ▶ Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- ▶ Stay home when you're sick—don't go to work or run errands and spread your illness.
- ▶ Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- ▶ Wash your hands often using anti-bacterial soap, and cough into your sleeve rather than into your hand.
- ▶ Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth—these are places easily contaminated with germs.
- ▶ Practice good health habits, like getting enough sleep, staying active, managing stress, drinking plenty of fluids, and eating healthy foods.

The next issue will provide tips on how to be prepared for a pandemic flu. Check out My Health<sub>Vet</sub> ([www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)) for more tips and information about flu prevention.



Dr. Kristin Nichol

## Falling Into Bad Habits This Season

**F**all. It's the time of year for football games, holiday get-togethers, falling leaves . . . and expanding waists. Unfortunately, those few pounds easily gained during the winter and fall are not as easily lost in the spring and summer, and can lead to health problems if compounded year after year. This fall, learn how to beat the



snack attack with healthy alternatives that might even give you enough energy to leave the couch and enjoy the outdoors!

When you're tempted with potato chips, pies, and other tasty treats, here are some alternatives to try:

- Peanut butter on a sliced apple
- Lowfat cheese and salsa in a whole wheat tortilla
- Raw vegetables with fat free salad dressing
- Fresh fruit



- Unsalted pretzels
- Nonfat yogurt fruit smoothie
- Lowfat popcorn
- Nut and raisin mix
- Reduced fat granola bars
- Lean turkey on wheat bread

If you are still craving a chocolaty brownie or cheesy mess of nachos, just remember to satisfy your cravings in moderation. Take your time, eat slowly, and enjoy it, and then make sure to pick a healthy alternative if you're still hungry. Also, it's easy to associate hunger with boredom. If you find yourself eating when you're not actually hungry, take a walk, read a book, or call a friend. Thirst is also mistaken for food cravings. Drink water or beverages with low sugar to keep yourself hydrated, and you may find that you don't feel hungry as often.

If you would like additional help with weight loss, contact the nearest VA facility and ask about the MOVE! program, the VA's national weight management program for veterans.

# Holiday

## S.T.R.E.S.S.



**D**o you manage every detail of the holiday season months in advance with a carefully organized list? Or instead, do you thrive on the adrenaline rush of waiting until the last minute, hoping to find each perfect gift just before the stores close? Perhaps you're somewhere between the two extremes—accomplishing some tasks but ultimately just crossing your fingers that all goes well.

Whichever category you fall into, you're not alone. The problem is, the very nature of holidays—travel, finances, and family dynamics—can cause stress, something most of us have plenty of all year long. Here are some ideas to minimize this season's impact on your life.

### Spending

Rather than run yourself ragged on a financial treadmill in the coming months, plan ahead to stretch your dollar.

- 🎁 Get resourceful, and set a spending limit for gifts.
- 🎁 If shopping locally, take cash only—no credit or debit cards.
- 🎁 Avoid the stores and create your own gifts!

### Time Management

Start early and use lists as a guideline, but set a cutoff date—anything that doesn't get done after that point will simply fall by the wayside so you can savor the holiday without overdoing it.

### Remember

Don't lose sight of the "reason for the season," whatever your reason may be. Give up holiday tasks you don't enjoy and carve out time for those that are important to you.

- 🎁 If you love seeing sparkling lights but don't have time to hang your own, drive around and enjoy seeing what others have done.

- 🎁 If the season is about giving to others for you, volunteer to visit hospital or nursing home patients, donate toys to a homeless shelter or sign up to help serve dinner at a soup kitchen.

### Extra patience

Spending extra time with family members doesn't always create warm, fuzzy feelings. Adults are often tired, financially strapped and irritable. Pay attention to the needs and expectations of everyone.

### Share with Others

Invite the family of a deployed soldier to share the day with your family. Ask about their holiday traditions and involve them in yours.

### Self Care

No matter what else you do—or don't do—during the holidays, you **MUST** take care of *yourself*.

- 🎁 Avoid the temptation to overindulge on alcohol and rich foods, set realistic deadlines, and get plenty of rest.
- 🎁 Do things you enjoy and simply refuse to let stress take over.
- 🎁 If you start to feel overwhelmed, take a break and call a friend, watch a movie, or take a walk.
- 🎁 Above all, enjoy yourself! You deserve it!

# 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**  
600 South 70th St  
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.med.va.gov](http://www.visn23.med.va.gov)



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