

VA research on

WOMEN'S HEALTH

There are more than 1.9 million women Veterans in the U.S., and the percentage of the total Veteran population they represent is increasing. VA research helps improve the department's ability to care for women Veterans of all eras.

ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH

- The presence of women in the U.S. armed forces has increased greatly in recent years, as has the number of women Veterans seeking VA health care.
- Living women Veterans currently make up more than 8 percent of the total Veteran population. By 2018, women are expected to account for 10 percent of all Veterans.
- In the early 1990s, women's health issues were declared a research priority, and VA took steps to increase the participation of women Veterans in its studies.
- In 2005, VA formed a Women's Health Research Planning Group and tasked the group with developing a research agenda for women Veterans and establishing VA as a national leader in investigating women's health issues. Their <u>report</u> was issued in 2006.

VA RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S HEALTH: OVERVIEW

• VA researchers are looking at a wide range of health issues related to women Veterans, including chronic diseases, reproductive health, cancer, mental health issues, and military occupational hazards.

- VA research on women Veterans aims to develop new ways to treat health issues important to women; build the skills of those who treat women Veterans; and identify the best strategies to address family and reproductive issues.
- VA's <u>Women's Health Research Network</u> is designed to build VA's capacity to conduct studies on women Veterans' health.
- A 2011 <u>review</u> of research on women Veterans revealed that more information was published by VA researchers in the five years from 2004 through 2008 than in the 25 years before that.
- <u>VA's Women's Health CREATE</u>, established in 2013, is among the VA groups now spearheading research on women Veterans' health.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

- 1988 Dr. Patricia Resick develops cognitive processing therapy to relieve the symptoms of PTSD experienced by victims of sexual violence
- **2007** VA researchers demonstrate the value of prolonged exposure therapy as a treatment for PTSD in female Veterans and active-duty military personnel

2009 – VA Research begins the largest health study ever of Vietnam-era women Veterans, with up to 10,000 women expected to take part

2014 – VA researchers publish studies on how combat-related PTSD symptoms differ by gender

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

- Prolonged-exposure therapy—a type of behavioral therapy in which therapists help patients recall their traumas under safe, controlled conditions—is more effective in reducing PTSD symptoms than an intervention called present-centered therapy. Partly as a result of this study, conducted by VA's National Center for PTSD, the department launched a nationwide effort to train more clinicians in this therapy. (*Journal of the American Medical Association*, Feb. 28, 2007)
- Women reported more severe PTSD symptoms and higher rates of probable PTSD than did men in a study of 801 National Guard soldiers deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. The researchers, from the Minneapolis VA Health Care System, said combat-related stressors; concerns about

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life and family disruption; and prior victimization, such as sexual abuse, are all associated with the severity of post-deployment PTSD symptoms in women. (*Journal of Psychiatric Research*, February 2014)

- Women aged 50 to 75 face no extra risk of breast cancer if they get a screening mammogram every two years instead of every year, according to a national study led by a researcher from the San Francisco VA Medical Center. Less frequent screening means less overall risk of false positives. Not every health provider abides by the recommendations of this research, however. Women ages 40 to 50 and those older than 75 should talk with their health care providers about the risks and benefits of having mammograms and make a decision based on their individual needs. (JAMA Internal Medicine, May 13, 2013)
- Many servicewomen believe that the disadvantages of reporting sexual assault outweigh the advantages. A study by investigators from the Iowa City VA Medical Centers found that fear of a career-threatening

reprisal could be a factor in whether or not to report an assault. Other issues included concerns about confidentiality, and a belief that nothing would be done if the assault was reported. (<u>American</u> <u>Journal of Preventative Medicine</u>, July 2014)

- Taking soy tablets doesn't boost bone density or help ease menopause symptoms, according to Miami VA researchers. In their study, older women who had recently reached menopause took either 200 milligrams of a soy tablet or a placebo each day. After two years, there were no differences in bone density in the spines, hips, or femurs of women in the study. (Archives of Internal Medicine, Aug. 8, 2011)
- Maintaining the social support of military peers after active duty is associated with better physical health among women Veterans, regardless of whether or not they have PTSD, according to VA Puget Sound Health Care System researchers. They analyzed the extent to which women Veterans maintained the social support of their military friends against the way they

reported on their own physical health, and the number of times they used VA health care. (*Journal of Traumatic Stress*, December 2013)

• VA has launched a comprehensive study of the health of Vietnam-era women Veterans. A five-year multisite study is examining the prevalence of PTSD and other mental and physical conditions in women Veterans, and the relationship of PTSD to their experiences while deployed. (VA Cooperative Study Program #579)

For more information on VA studies on women's health and other key topics relating to Veterans' health, please visit www.research.va.gov/topics

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