

Research to Improve the
Lives of Women Veterans



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WOMEN'S HEALTH

VA Research and Development Program:
Focusing on Women Veterans' Special
Health Care Needs



Veterans Health Administration
Research & Development
Improving Veterans' Lives  www.research.va.gov

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A Message to Our Women Veterans

With the fast-growing presence of women in the U.S. armed forces, there has been a steep increase in the number of women veterans seeking Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care. Numbering 1.7 million currently, women veterans make up 7 percent of the total veteran population—and are expected to account for 10 percent of veterans by the year 2020.

VA is committed to delivering the best-quality care to meet the special health care needs of women veterans, including the more than 250,000 who already use VA health care services. To support provision of this kind of world-class care, the VA has established research in women veterans' health as a top priority.

VA's commitment to women's health care research is a longstanding one: In 1983, VA mandated that all studies that it conducts or supports include female veterans, and in 1992, VA formally defined women's health issues as a research priority. In 2005, VA research formed a Women's Health Research Planning Group to develop an expansive research agenda for women veterans and to establish VA as a national leader in the investigation of women's health.

Today, more VA-based women's health research is being funded than ever before. Research efforts are aimed at better understanding the general health care needs and service utilization of women veterans; examining the unique experiences of



women veterans regarding risks, treatment, and health care outcomes related to military traumas; assessing VA's organization of care for women veterans and the implications for improving quality of care; and developing innovative ways to meet female veterans' health needs.

This brochure highlights examples of VA Research's innovations and discoveries that are further advancing health care for women.

Joel Kupersmith, M.D.
Chief Research and Development Officer
Department of Veterans Affairs



Spotlight on VA Research



Women's gender-specific health care needs, including some that are combat-related, have been an important part

of VA's research agenda for more than a decade. Research in this area is greatly advanced by VA's partnerships with other organizations that share its strong commitment to promoting women's health and advancing gender equity in health care.

Research into Women's Health Conditions

Research priorities cover a broad range of conditions particularly relevant to women veterans—among them, chronic diseases, cancer, mental health issues, military occupational hazards, reproductive health, and amputations.

Important areas of VA Research focusing on women veterans' health conditions include:

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**—In the largest randomized clinical trial to date involving women veterans with PTSD, VA researchers and their colleagues found that prolonged-exposure therapy—a type of cognitive behavioral therapy in which therapists help patients recall their traumas under safe, controlled conditions—was more effective in reducing PTSD symptoms than emotional support and counseling focused on current problems.

- **Violence against servicewomen**—To identify risk factors for sexual assault and physical violence against women in the military, a VA research team is interviewing about 500 active-duty women and female veterans, all currently or formerly with the reserves or National Guard. The researchers will also look at the women's health outcomes and any barriers to VA care.
- **Mammography recommendations**—An American College of Physicians committee chaired by VA and Stanford University researcher Douglas Owens, M.D., recently published a new set of mammogram guidelines for women in their 40s. The guidelines, based on a rigorous review of the medical literature, call for periodically performing individual assessments of breast cancer risk; informing women of the potential benefits and harms of the procedure; and incorporating women's preferences and risk profiles into screening decisions.
- **Other gender-specific health issues**—Additional VA research is examining the cellular mechanisms underlying breast and cervical cancers, the role of hormones in stroke and aging, the basic neurobiological changes in women who have gone through severe trauma, and tailored prosthetic designs for women.



“Women who served this country in uniform—whether veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, the current Global War on Terror, or peacetime service—have earned our respect and thanks. They have also earned the full range of VA programs offered by a grateful nation.” James B. Peake, M.D., Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs

Research into Care, Quality, and Access

Current studies are examining the health care usage of women veterans and assessing delivery of care to this population to identify effective approaches, barriers to care, and opportunities for care improvement.

VA Research focusing on women's health care satisfaction and the delivery of equitable, high-quality care to female veterans has yielded valuable findings:

- **Quality and sensitivity as top-ranked issues**—Researchers have found that among the health care issues that matter most to women veterans are overall quality of care, access to gender-appropriate services, and a gender-sensitive environment that respects privacy.
- **Gynecologic services as key to satisfaction**—Availability of routine gynecologic care within primary care settings, which reduces fragmentation of women's health care, has been found to directly influence whether women choose VA or non-VA care. Integrated gynecologic care—along with access to female providers—earns VA primary care clinics extremely high satisfaction ratings among women veterans.
- **Dedicated women's clinic as important factor**—Women veterans are more satisfied with women's clinics than traditional primary care clinics, and the availability of such clinics is cited by many women as a major factor in their choosing VA care.
- **Lack of knowledge as barrier to use**—Educational campaigns could be useful in improving women veterans' knowledge about VA eligibility and available services, research has shown. Many women veterans not enrolled in the VA health system are unaware that VA provides women's health care, according to a recent VA study, and even female veterans who use VA care are not fully informed about the types and quality of care available.

We have created a crucial foundation of information about women's health conditions, concerns, and experience with care inside and outside VA that will enable us to improve their health care in the future.

Elizabeth Yano, M.D., VA HSR&D Center for the Study of Healthcare Provider Behavior, Sepulveda, CA.

Evolving Research Initiatives

In structuring its research agenda, VA continually evaluates the unique health-related needs of women, as well as disparities in care between male and female veterans. Ongoing research initiatives aim to contribute to:

- Development of improved therapeutic strategies for health issues important to women, such as breast cancer, cardiac conditions, and colorectal cancer.
- Skills enhancement for primary care providers who treat women veterans.
- Improvement of health strategies for family and reproductive issues, including preventive measures to avoid birth defects in children of women veterans.

To ensure that VA stays on the leading edge of women's health care, the Department conducts and participates in conferences focusing on women veterans' health issues, including:

“Women in Pain: Gender Matters”—The issues for consideration at this May 2008 conference at the City of Hope Medical Center in Duarte, Calif., included research on women in pain and disparities in pain treatment between women and men.

Fourth National Summit on Women Veterans' Issues—This June 2008 event focused on advancing issues relating to women veterans, including military sexual trauma and readjustment.



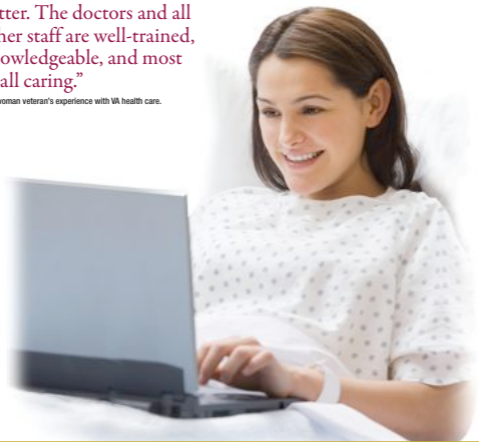
Expansive Women-Focused Health Services

To respond to the unique needs of women veterans, VA offers comprehensive high-quality primary health care services for women, including Pap smears, mammography, and reproductive health care, as well as mental health services such as substance abuse counseling and treatment of military sexual trauma.

Every VA medical center has a women veterans program manager; every community-based outpatient clinic has a women's liaison; and every regional office has a women veterans coordinator. In addition to the services provided at each VA medical center, some 50 Women's Health Centers serve women veterans specifically. These centers—whose numbers have increased eight-fold in the past decade in response to increasing need—develop enhanced programs for women, and some also conduct research in medical and psychosocial issues.

“I could not have asked for better. The doctors and all other staff are well-trained, knowledgeable, and most of all caring.”

One woman veteran's experience with VA health care.



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