



Today's



VETERAN

The Wellness Magazine for VA Southeast Network Veterans and Stakeholders

Winter 2007



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a message from the DIRECTOR

As we welcome the New Year, I want to take this opportunity to extend my personal thanks to all of the employees, volunteers, veterans service organizations and other stakeholders in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina for your caring support of the veterans in VISN 7. It takes a dedicated team to keep our medical centers operating and delivering quality and compassionate care to our patients. Like our counterparts throughout the VA, we are working to provide the highest quality and the safest care for veterans, and our efforts have been recognized this year by many groups – and even the national media.

During the coming year, I ask each of you to reaffirm your commitment to our core mission of serving veterans. One of the challenges we must face is the problem of "missed opportunities." Did you know that in the last year there were over 302,000 "no shows" for appointments at medical centers and clinics across VISN 7? The impact of missed opportunities in clinical and administrative settings is overwhelming. Since each "no show" costs an average of \$40, this resulted in approximately \$12 million dollars of health care resources that could have been more efficiently used for care of veterans.

Even more importantly, however, this is a patient safety issue because we miss the opportunity to care for both the veteran scheduled for that appointment time and another veteran waiting for an appointment. Due to these concerns, I will be hosting a Missed Opportunities Summit in January 2007 to kick off strategies to improve this process.

Briefly, we will be addressing four major goals at the January summit: improving telephone strategies for scheduling and rescheduling appointments; reviewing "real time" monitors and measuring missed opportunity rates; promoting and training patients to use My HealtheVet for appointment reminders and cancellations; and communicating these strategies to all employees in VISN 7.

This is a critical problem and a top priority for 2007 – I welcome your ideas and input for this important event.

Also of vital concern in the coming months is helping our patients weather the winter. In this edition of Today's Veteran, we offer information and some creative tips on staying safe, fit and healthy as the temperature drops – and on saving energy. Also included are articles aimed at those who face additional challenges related to arthritis and seasonal depression. And, we've provided a primer on diabetes for those who are at risk.

Again, I want to thank you all for your collective and continuing efforts to improve the quality of care our patients receive. I am very proud of the employees in the VA Southeast Network who openly give of their time and energy and who provide a wide range of skilled services and support for our veterans. We are indeed privileged to have the honor of providing health care to our nation's heroes and, as such, we must be aware of the constant need to address their changing and emerging requirements and the factors that impact their satisfaction and loyalty. We want to be the veteran's first choice for care.

Sincerely,

Thomas A. Cappello, FACHE
Acting Director, VA Southeast Network (VISN 7)

We want to hear from YOU!

Your opinions and ideas are very important to us. Please let us know what topics you would like to see covered in future issues of Today's Veteran.

Attach a separate piece of paper, and send your comments c/o: Jeff Hester, Editor, VAMC, 700 South 19th Street (00B), Birmingham, AL 35233

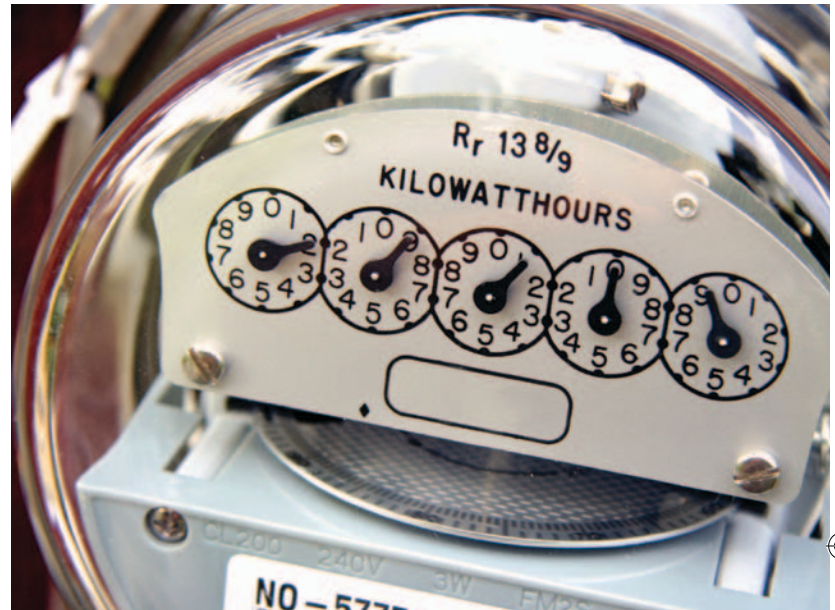
Saving Energy and Staying Warm

If you own a typical U.S. home, heating and air conditioning account for about 56% of your energy use. Heating is the largest energy expense in most homes, but there are ways that you can reduce the amount of energy you use (and pay for) while still staying warm over the winter:

- Check the insulation levels in your attic, exterior and basement walls, ceilings, floors, and crawl spaces.
- Check for holes or cracks around your walls, ceilings, windows, doors, light and plumbing fixtures, switches, and electrical outlets that can leak air into or out of your home.



- Check for open fireplace dampers.
- Make sure your appliances and heating and cooling systems are properly maintained. Check your owner's manuals for the recommended maintenance.



- If the doors to the closet that houses your hot water heater have louvers or grills, do not cover or set anything in front of them. If you leave for vacation, turn the water heater down. (There's no reason to reheat the same water over and over again if you're not going to use it.)
- If you feel there is a problem with the furnace and you can't stay warm, do not use the stove for additional heat—it is dangerous. Burning gas in a closed house or apartment uses up oxygen and produces deadly carbon monoxide gases
- On sunny days, take advantage of the free heat. Open blinds, shades, and curtains, especially if your windows face south, to help keep your apartment or home warm. Then simply turn down the thermostat or close the radiator valves to keep from getting too hot. At night, close the blinds, shades, and curtains to help keep heat in rather than allowing it to escape through the window.

Diabetes:

Still Dangerous After All These Years

If you're over 40, you may be among the 18.2 million Americans diagnosed with diabetes. What's worse – you may be among the 5.2 million who don't even know they have it. And the longer diabetes goes untreated, the more harmful it can be.



What is Diabetes?

There are two types of diabetes: Type I, also known as juvenile diabetes, occurs when the pancreas stops producing insulin and is generally diagnosed by young adulthood; and Type II diabetes, occurs when the body's tissues gradually become less able to use insulin to process glucose from the blood and typically occurs in elderly and/or overweight individuals. While neither type of diabetes is curable, in many cases, Type II diabetes can be avoided.

Symptoms of Diabetes

In addition to elevated blood sugar levels, individuals with diabetes may experience excessive thirst and urination, daytime tiredness, difficulty sleeping,

blurry vision, poor wound healing and cognitive impairment. Left untreated, diabetes can lead to more serious complications, such as loss of sight, diminished physical sensations, kidney malfunction, balance impairment, high blood pressure and circulation weakened to the point of necessitating limb amputation.

How to Prevent Diabetes

Research has shown conclusively that a healthy diet and regular exercise can help to reduce the risk of acquiring diabetes; in one study, by more than 71 percent. Even those diagnosed with pre-diabetes (elevated blood sugar but no other diabetic symptoms) have been able to reverse the course of their



Managing Diabetes

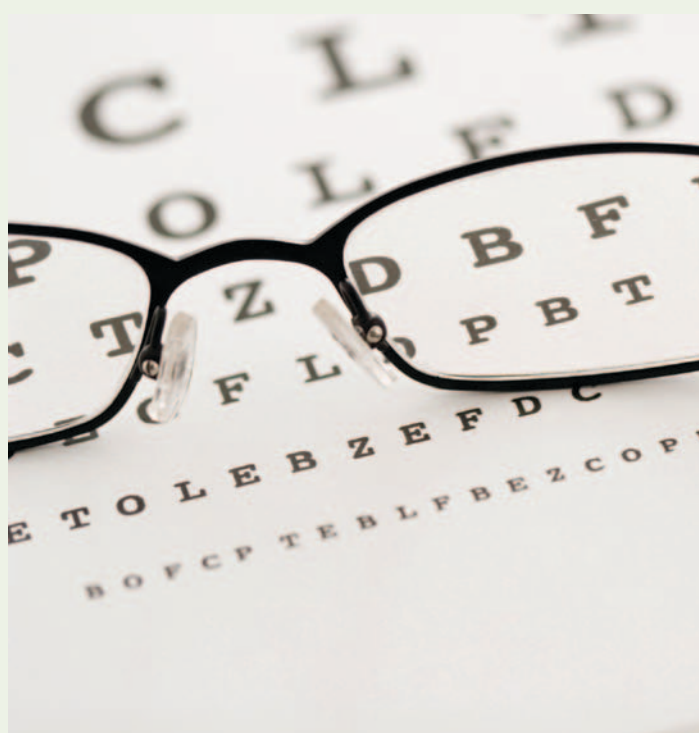
If you have been diagnosed with diabetes, there are a number of things you can do to monitor and control the effects of the disease:

- Use a home blood-glucose meter to test your blood sugar level regularly and get an A1c test taken every six months by your doctor;
- Schedule an annual dilated eye exam;
- Have your cholesterol and blood pressure tested periodically;
- Consult your doctor about taking 1/2 an aspirin each day to reduce the risk of heart attack;
- Have an annual urine test done to check your kidney function;
- Check your feet daily for blisters, cuts or infections; and
- Get an annual flu shot.

sugar level after fasting and after ingesting a sugar solution. Another popular, but less reliable test is the fasting plasma glucose test, which involves only one blood measurement after eight hours of fasting.

Pharmaceutical Treatment for Diabetes

In recent years, many new types of medications have been developed to help control blood sugar, such as Glucophage, which lowers the liver's glucose output;



declining health and prevent diabetes by losing weight and increasing their activity.

Exercise, in addition to helping with weight loss, stimulates the muscles to more efficiently use insulin to process glucose. So, a brisk walk each day can be beneficial on a number of levels.

Do You Have Diabetes?

The most effective means for testing for diabetes is the oral glucose tolerance test, which involves having blood drawn at intervals throughout the day to measure the blood

Precose and Glyset, which slow carbohydrate digestion; Actos and Avandia, which raise cells' sensitivity to insulin; Starlix, Byetta and Prandin, which stimulate insulin secretion; and Symlin, which boosts insulin's effect.

There have also been many improvements in insulins ranging from fast- to slow-acting; from needle to pen injected; and from external pumps to (potentially) implanted pumps. Even inhaled insulin and insulin patches are in development.



Cold Weather Tips

for Your Health & Safety

Weathering winter can be a challenge if you're unprepared or uninformed about the dangers of ice, wind and cold weather. The likelihood of injury or illness depends on factors such as physical activity, clothing, wind, humidity, working and living conditions, and a person's age and state of health. However, if you take a moment to review the following tips, you'll be far likelier to greet the spring in good health:

If you need to venture out in severe weather, limit your exposure and dress in several layers. Be sure to cover your head (where the body loses 40% of its heat) and wear a waterproof and or windproof outer layer. Should your clothes become wet, seek warm shelter and remove them immediately.

If you anticipate being out in the elements for an extended period of time, do not smoke or consume alcohol which can cause changes in the circulatory system that make the body even colder.

Always assume that below-freezing temperatures will cause ice to form on walking and driving surfaces. Take extra precaution testing and traveling on these, especially on "black ice," the thin, transparent layer of ice that is particularly treacherous.

Recognize the symptoms of hypothermia: confusion, dizziness, slurred speech, exhaustion and severe shivering. Seek medical attention immediately if you have these symptoms.

In your home, make sure that electric heaters and blankets are U.L. or F.M. rated, and kept away from any combustible materials such as draperies and linens. Unplug electric blankets and portable electric heaters when not in use.

In your car, keep a box filled with extra blankets, a shovel, an ice scraper, bottled water and flares. Finally, remember to check up on elderly relatives or neighbors when the temperature drops.

Staying Fit

Over the Winter

Don't let cold, rainy or windy weather force you into hibernation! Winter is a great time to try new fitness activities that will improve your mood, increase your energy level and help you sleep better. Consider these indoor activities for exercise:

- Walk around the mall
- Swim or take a water aerobics class at a local indoor pool
- Buy some used home exercise equipment
- Take a class in yoga, tai chi or ballroom dancing
- Exercise along with TV programs or videos
- Join a health club



If you prefer to exercise outdoors, just remember these few safety tips:

- Get your doctor's OK (for some people, cold air can trigger chest pain or asthma attacks).
- Dress in layers, starting with synthetic material such as polypropylene, which draws sweat away from your body. Next, try fleece for insulation and top this with a waterproof outer layer. If clothing gets wet, return inside and remove it as soon as possible
- Set off into the wind and return with it at your back to avoid becoming chilled.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Cold air can increase the risk of dehydration, which, in turn, increases the risk of frostbite.
- Beware of slippery surfaces and poor natural light.
- Pay attention to wind chill. Fast motion – such as running, cycling or skating – also creates wind chill because it increases air movement past your body.

Clinical Depression or Holiday Blues?

Everyone feels gloomy and sad once in awhile, but for the 19 million Americans who suffer from clinical depression each year, these feelings are unrelenting and rob them of their ability to lead normal, healthy lives. In spite of the good cheer of the Holiday Season, seeing everyone else feeling happy and excited only serves to emphasize the pain of a clinical depression.

Depression, which is particularly common among older Americans, is a medical condition caused by an imbalance of brain chemicals, called neurotransmitters. But depression is not a normal part of the aging process. Rather, many things, including certain medications, chronic, or degenerative medical conditions, changes in living conditions or the loss of loved ones can trigger it. It has been shown to be associated with other common medical disorders such as migraine headaches, diabetes, obesity, and chronic pain.

Common symptoms of depression can range from losing interest in people and activities to experiencing unexplained aches and pains over long periods of time. Depression can cause indecisiveness, difficulty concentrating or with memory, withdrawal from family and friends, weight changes, fatigue, mild digestive problems and a generalized dissatisfaction with life.

Effective Treatments for Depression

The good news for those who suffer from depression is that, once identified, it is highly treatable. Through medication and/or cognitive therapy (changing the way in which a person perceives his/her life), most people are able to recover and to rediscover joy and purpose in their lives.

The most commonly for depression are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's), such as paroxetine, sertraline, fluoxetine, or citalopram. It takes between 4-8 weeks for these drugs to provide relief and they must be taken regularly for 6-9 months to provide long-term benefits.

Once the medication is started, cognitive therapy (either individual or group) is recommended to help identify and correct negative patterns of thinking that contribute to depression. These may range from harboring unrealistic expectations to predicting the worst outcome to every situation.

Professional counselors also advise patients to increase their contact with friends and family, engage in activities to benefit others (i.e., community service, charity work, etc.), begin a physical fitness program and renew their spiritual commitments.

Could You Be Depressed?

The following questions are excerpts from the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS).

- 1) Have you dropped many of your activities and interests?
- 2) Are you bothered by thoughts you can't get out of your head?
- 3) Do you frequently get upset over little things?
- 4) Do you think that most people are better off than you are?
- 5) Are you hopeful about the future?
- 6) Do you enjoy getting up in the morning?

A Positive Screen is a "No" to number 6, or a "Yes" to any of the first five. No matter what your age, if you answered "yes" to any of the first 5, or "no" to # 6, you are at risk of having a clinical depression, and should report this to your doctor as soon as possible.

Only about 20-30% of all persons suffering from depression get adequate treatment, primarily because a) they believe that they should be able to handle their problems without medical help; b) they don't know where to go for services; c) they believe there's a stigma associated with mental/emotional problems; or d) they don't believe that treatment will help.

In the VA Southeast Network, screening for depression is provided annually and/or during physicals and intakes for new patients at every VA Medical Center and Community Based Outpatient Clinic. However, if you or a veteran you know has symptoms of depression, please bring it to the attention of the Primary Care provider now. There is help for this illness and ongoing suffering is unnecessary.

Managing Arthritis During the Cold Months



Winter is rarely welcomed by arthritis sufferers who, literally, feel the cold right down to their bones. Those with Raynaud's phenomenon (characterized by numbness in the fingers and toes) are particularly affected by cold weather; while those with rheumatoid arthritis experience more stiffness and aching from winter's barometric pressure changes.

There's no reason to shiver and suffer until Spring, however. Below are some tips for relieving arthritis pain when the temperature drops:

Apply heat. To relieve pain and stiffness, try heat therapies such as heated pools, whirlpools, warm showers, warm compresses or microwaveable heat packs.

Orange Power: Recent research points to the importance of vitamin C and other antioxidants in reducing your risk of osteoarthritis. So, take advantage of winter's bounty of oranges and orange juice.

Curtail your caffeine intake. While a hot cup of coffee may seem like just the thing to warm you up, studies show that more than one cup a day can weaken your bones. Try a nice, steaming mug of apple cider, herbal tea, chicken broth, lowfat milk or sugarfree hot chocolate, instead.

Resolve to reduce. Don't let the cold out there be an excuse for packing the pounds on there! Every extra pound puts four times the stress on your knees. Research shows that losing as little as 11 pounds may cut your risk of osteoarthritis of the knee by 50 percent.

Stretch often. To help keep your muscles and ligaments flexible and strong, take breaks throughout the day to get warm and re-energized by stretching.



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