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Prevention is key to health of Soldiers, mission, nation

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If there was one, overarching message at this year's Army Force Health Protection Conference, it was this: prevention is not only the key to individual health, it's increasingly vital to the Army and nation's military success and economic well-being.

Attendees at the 10th annual Force Health Protection Conference Aug. 4-11 in Louisville, Ky., heard that message loud, clear and often. They also explored planning for public health emergencies like pandemic flu, using integrated medicine to heal Soldiers physically and mentally, food safety, nanotechnology and many other "hot" public health topics.

The conference, hosted by the Army Center for Health Promotion & Preventive Medicine, is the largest conference devoted to disease and injury prevention in the DOD. It drew a record-breaking 2,100 public health and healthcare professionals, up from last year's attendance of about 1,700. They represented the military and U.S. Public Health Service, the Veterans Administration, other government agencies and academia. They had 630-plus presentations and more than 30 workshops to choose from—most with continuing medical education credits.

The conference's plenary session boasted top DOD and U.S. public health experts who were of one mind on the subject of prevention.

Brig. Gen. Michael B. Cates, CHPPM commander and the Army's senior preventive medicine officer, welcomed the large crowd and stated, "We still think prevention is the best way to health." From an operational standpoint, preventing diseases and injuries—rather than fixing them after they happen—maximizes available warrior-power on the battlefield. Hospitalization and rehabilitative care rapidly compound costs: both nationally and in the military health system, about 97 percent of medical costs are spent on fixing medical problems, while about 3 percent goes to preventing those problems. And, staying healthy and avoiding hospital diagnostics and treatment is certainly better from an individual Soldier's perspective.

Other speakers agreed that military health care needs to work harder at accelerating preventive efforts, as does the rest of the U.S. healthcare system.

Calling the Army's current approach to health care a "disease-care system," Acting Army Surgeon General Maj. Gen. Gale S. Pollock emphasized that a preventive approach makes better sense.

"We need to care for people inside the Army the same way we care for our vehicles and our weapons," she said, citing the intensive routine maintenance that war-fighting equipment undergoes to keep it in top-notch condition.

Pollock touched on several Army innovations aimed at enlisting Soldiers and family members in preventing or mitigating health issues like post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and deployment strains on spouses and children. These initiatives include Battlemind, a training system that prepares Soldiers for the stress of war and helps detect mental health issues before and after deployment; the Army Chain Teaching Program, aimed at reducing the stigma Soldiers face when seeking care for behavioral health or traumatic brain injuries; and a proactive, preventive set of videos to prepare children of various ages to cope when a parent deploys.

The DOD-level perspective on the importance of preventing illness and injury to winning wars was offered by Ellen Embrey, assistant secretary of defense for force health protection and readiness.

"The department's force health protection and medical readiness programs use a wide range of military health system resources to promote health, protect force health and sustain the medical readiness of our Active and Reserve component military personnel," Embrey said.

Those programs and resources have ensured that Soldiers fighting in current operations are less likely to be sidelined by disease and non-battle injury, or DNBI.

Historically, DNBI have been a greater cause of casualties than injuries inflicted by enemy combatants, Embrey said. However, rates for Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom continue to be the lowest reported for any previous major military contingency operation.

"The DNBI rate per week has been about 5 percent in OEF and 4 percent for OIF, she said. "For comparison, DNBI rates per week for the 1991 Gulf War were 6.5 percent; for Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia, they were 7.1 percent; and for Operation Joint Guardian in Kosovo, they were 8.1 percent."

Fewer personnel affected by illness and injury yields increased mission success, reduces the need for replacement warriors, and decreases demand for medical treatment and evacuation.

Embrey cited pre- and post-deployment health assessments (maintained by CHPPM's Army Medical Surveillance Activity), pre-deployment hazard assessments, environmental health surveillance (conducted by CHPPM and deployed preventive medicine specialists), and periodic health assessments and screenings (conducted by military medical treatment facilities and medical units) as key components of the invisible, medical body armor designed to keep Soldiers fit, physically resilient, and resistant to illness and injury.

These measures, however, address specialized health issues created when wars are fought. Even more fundamental to prevention are home-front measures that can be taken to prevent chronic and long-term health issues faced by military members and civilians alike.

Eating healthy foods, reducing alcohol intake, exercising, controlling weight and regular medical checkups are the weapons all can use to fight Americans' No. 1 killer, heart disease, and other lifestyle-associated diseases like some cancers, diabetes and obesity.

Results of this year's DOD "Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel," indicated that smoking (including use of smokeless tobacco products), alcohol consumption and overweight are issues that Soldiers in some age groups need to target for improvement.

Prevention of these chronic diseases is a shared concern, one that Acting U.S. Surgeon General Rear Adm. Kenneth Moritsugu emphasized as fundamental to his mission and that of military public health practitioners.

Moritsugu, the nation's top public health official and the senior officer of the U.S. Public Health Service, urged conference attendees to "stay engaged" on this longer-term prevention goal. Prevention of chronic diseases leads to both healthier communities and reduced healthcare costs, he said.

"We recognize that good health doesn't just happen. Rather, it's a habit of smart choices and sound clinical care" Moritsugu emphasized. "Disease prevention and wellness are neither civilian nor military constructs—they are both. ... Healthy choices, identifying and understanding what makes for good health—these are universally applicable practices."

(See sidebar article for additional comments from the U.S. surgeon general on prevention.)

Next year's Force Health Protection Conference will reflect continued emphasis on the importance of prevention to individuals and healthcare systems. Slated for Aug. 8-15 in Albuquerque, its theme is, "Prevention is the Key." Visit <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/fhp> for information.

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The U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine is the Army's public health organization. It supports Soldiers around the world with health education information and deploys its expert medical and scientific staff to deliver occupational and environmental health surveillance everywhere Soldiers go. On U.S. military installations, CHPPM provides environmental health engineering and health hazard assessments as well as injury and disease prevention programs.

Captions:

Immunization.jpg

Immunizations are part of a Soldier's "invisible body armor," helping to fight against diseases that may be present in deployed environments. (CHPPM photo)

Runner-heat.jpg or Soldier fitness morph.jpg

Exercise builds endurance, strength and resilience, all important to preventing injuries, keeping weight under control and precluding chronic illnesses that stem from obesity. (Photo-artwork by Ben Bunger, CHPPM)

Choosing fruit.jpg

Eating healthy foods helps service members, whose jobs are physically demanding, stay lean. (Ben Bunger, CHPPM)

FHP registration.jpg

This year's Force Health Protection Conference, the 10th annual, set an all-time high attendance record of 2,100 public health professionals, some of whom are shown at the conference registration desk. (Ben Bunger, CHPPM)

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