

Perceptions of Physical Activity in Post Deployment OEF/OIF Veterans

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Objectives: Physical inactivity has been linked to a host of poor health outcomes. While veterans typically engage in high levels of physical activity while on active duty, those who become sedentary are at the same risk for developing chronic disease as the rest of the population. This study sought to examine perceptions of physical activity in post deployment OEF/OIF veterans, as well as to examine changes in self-reported physical activity between active duty and post deployment.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional survey of OEF/OIF veterans registered with the Ann Arbor VA since U.S. operations began in 2001 through July, 2007. Invitations to participate in an online survey were sent to OEF/OIF veterans through the U.S. mail. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data, as well as perceptions of physical activity post deployment.

Results: In total, 319 individuals responded to the survey. Participants were primarily male (86%), white (87%), and were more than two years since their most recent OEF/OIF deployment (76%). Overwhelmingly, respondents report that they find staying physically fit to be important (77% agree or strongly agree), worry about gaining weight (72% agree or strongly agree), and believe that exercise will keep them healthy (90% agree or strongly agree). However, many respondents report that they have health problems (39% agree or strongly agree), as well as chronic pain (52% agree or strong agree) that makes it hard to exercise.

Conclusions: Results from this investigation indicate that post deployment OEF/OIF veterans recognize the benefits of regular physical activity, yet many report barriers to physical activity caused by health problems and/or chronic pain.

Impact: Physical activity is an important part of promoting both better physical and mental health as well as reducing risks for future poor health outcomes. This research highlights the need to develop strategies that facilitate physical activity among OEF/OIF veterans and in particular strategies that help to address and overcome barriers to maintaining or engaging in physical activity post-deployment.