

Veterans

The VA MidSouth Healthcare Network Wellness Journal

Health Watch

Summer 2008

**Don't miss out
on free health
benefits**

**Advanced
heart care**

**Ready to
go organic?**

MidSouth
Healthcare Network



Veterans Health Watch is a wellness journal published quarterly by the VA MidSouth Healthcare Network (VISN 9). *Veterans Health Watch* is designed to promote healthy lifestyles and give veterans and their personal caregivers insightful information about managing and accessing health care from VA Medical Centers within VISN 9.

This publication is not a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

Your feedback is welcomed. If you would like to comment on any of the articles or submit information for possible publication, please write to:

Editor, 10N9E
Veterans Health Watch
 VISN 9
 1801 West End Ave., Suite 1100
 Nashville, TN 37203

Executive Editor

Sandra L. Glover

Editorial Board

Deborah Brammer, Huntington, W.Va.
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Improving care, one patient at a time

Dear Veteran:

Patient satisfaction. Those two words guide us as health care providers to deliver the best possible care to every veteran who enters our medical facilities. Sometimes we fall short of your expectations, but if we do, there are people in place to help resolve issues or clarify any miscommunication.

Patient advocates are trained professionals located at each VA Medical Center whose sole responsibility is your satisfaction with our services. Patient advocates will assist you at the service level—they work on-site in collaboration with the medical center to help resolve issues and seek opportunities for improvement. Patient advocates are also problem solvers and good listeners who rely on patient communication to help make every veteran's experience a good experience. The patient advocacy program strives to address issues in a convenient and timely manner.

Another big part of patient satisfaction is service recovery. We use this term to describe how we respond to complaints and resolve issues, turning a seemingly unpleasant experience into a positive and memorable one. We want you to leave our medical facilities feeling satisfied that we've done the very best for you. When this happens, it improves our overall service for veterans because these successes are often tracked and shared among other medical facilities to benefit them as well.

In the coming months, VA MidSouth Healthcare Network (VISN 9) is placing strong emphasis on bolstering efforts to ensure that you're completely satisfied with the care and service you receive from us. Our satisfaction goal is to exceed veteran, family and employee expectations. If for any reason we don't meet your expectations, seek out your patient advocate; if needed, the facility director is also there to assist with your needs.

John Dandridge, Jr.
 Network Director

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Attention veterans!

Don't miss out on free VA health care benefits

Military veterans who served in combat since November 11, 1998, including veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, are now eligible for five years of free medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for most conditions. This measure increases a two-year limit that had been in effect for nearly a decade.

“By their service and their sacrifice, America’s newest combat veterans have earned this special eligibility period for VA’s world-class health care,” says James B. Peake, M.D., secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The five-year deadline doesn’t affect veterans who have medical conditions related to their military service. Veterans may apply at any time after their discharge from the military—even decades later—for medical care for service-connected health problems.

Eligibility details

The new provision, which is part of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 signed by President Bush on January 28, 2008, applies to care in a VA hospital, outpatient clinic or nursing home. It also extends VA dental benefits—previously limited to 90 days after discharge for most veterans—to 180 days.

Combat veterans who were discharged between November 11, 1998, and January 16, 2003, who never took advantage of VA’s health care system, have until January 27, 2011, to qualify for free VA health care. The five-year window is also open to activated reservists and members of the National



Guard if they served in combat operations after November 11, 1998, and were discharged under other-than-dishonorable conditions.

Veterans who take advantage of this five-year window to receive VA health care can continue to receive care after five years, although they may have to pay co-payments for medical problems unrelated to their military service. Co-payments range from \$8 for a 30-day supply of prescription medicine to \$1,024 for the first 90 days of inpatient care each year. ■

Know your rights

For more information about the five-year VA health care benefit program, visit www.va.gov and click on “Health Care Benefits/Eligibility.”

14 ways to make activity a daily habit

If you're just starting ...

- 1 Consider walking.** It's cheap and easy to fit into your day.
- 2 Buy a pedometer.** This inexpensive gadget hooks to your waistband and counts your every step. Work your way up to 10,000 steps a day.
- 3 Schedule it.** Whatever your chosen activity, make an appointment with yourself to do it daily.
- 4 Buddy up.** Exercise with a friend, your spouse, your kids—anyone who'll hold you to your commitment.
- 5 Avoid shortcuts** in your everyday routines. For instance, take more than one trip up the stairs to put away the laundry.
- 6 Play** catch, climb trees, jump rope, try pool tag.
- 7 Change with the seasons.** Swim in the summer. Rake leaves in the fall. When winter comes, go ice skating or try indoor volleyball. Come springtime, put on the work gloves and clean the house or the garage.

VA can help!

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers two exercise programs designed with you in mind. Visit www.HealthierUSVeterans.va.gov or www.MOVE.va.gov to learn more. For a free copy of VA's "Get Fit for Life" exercise DVD, please complete and return the attached postage-paid postcard. Allow six to eight weeks for delivery.



If you already exercise regularly ...

- 8 Get better.** Hire a personal trainer for some customized pointers.
- 9 Get competitive.** Sign up and train for a race or walkathon. Join a local team; check your YMCA, YWCA or health club for leads.
- 10 Mix it up.** If you've always biked alone, check out a cycling club. If you regularly work out with a friend, try a solo session once a week.
- 11 Cross train.** Work different muscles and feel the power of your body in a new way. If you're a runner, try racquetball. If you lift weights, give ballroom dancing a whirl.
- 12 Plan an exercise vacation.** Consider ski trips, bike excursions, hikes and city walking tours.
- 13 Push harder.** Up your intensity or go longer. Mix in some yoga for flexibility or free weights for strength.
- 14 Reward yourself.** When you hit an exercise milestone, treat yourself to a new outfit, bubble bath or massage. ■

On the leading edge of heart surgery

By Chris Conklin, VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System

One surgeon described it as the difference between driving a high-performance sports car and flying a fighter jet. This may be hard for the average person to understand with regard to heart surgery, but for the heart surgeons at VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System (TVHS), minimally invasive heart valve repair and replacement procedures are creating quite the adrenaline rush. The surgeons at the TVHS Nashville campus have recently started performing these procedures in a collaborative effort with Vanderbilt University Medical Center.



Patient benefits

Surgeons have seen remarkable results in patient recovery time. More important, physicians can add candidates to the list for this new procedure who weren't physically able to withstand the stress of a more invasive procedure.

The traditional procedure, which required a large incision that placed added strain on the patient's heart muscle, nearly inhibited surgeons from being able to perform a second procedure. With the minimally invasive procedure, however, surgeons are able to avoid existing scar tissue while inserting replacement valves.

Hospital costs reduced

In addition to health benefits, minimally invasive heart valve repair and replacement surgery brings financial advantages. Patients who have this surgery

are able to return home quickly, which reduces costs from a lengthy hospital stay.

This is a win-win situation for surgeons, too, who are not only reducing heart surgery costs but also providing patients with a lower-risk operation. The greatest reward, however, is knowing they changed a veteran's life for the better. With every minimally invasive heart procedure TVHS surgeons perform, they take another step in becoming the heart surgery leader in veterans' health care. ■

Is this surgery right for you?

For more information about minimally invasive heart valve surgery, talk to your physician.



From the garden to your table

Organic vegetables are showing up in supermarkets all across the country, but often at higher prices. If you'd like to avoid pesticides but save some money, now is the perfect time to plan your own vegetable garden. Here are what some of the most popular grow-'em-yourself crops have to offer:

Good reasons to grow your own

Need an incentive for cultivating your own garden? Here are three!

- Gardening just 30 to 45 minutes three times a week can decrease your blood pressure, increase your HDL cholesterol (the good kind) and help reduce your risk of type 2 diabetes.
- Gardening ranks right up there with playing volleyball, brisk walking or golfing when it comes to average number of calories burned (from 125 calories an hour for a 120-pound person to 328 for a 180-pound person—more if your weight exceeds 180 pounds).
- You'll ease stress and anxiety, sharpen your mental skills and derive satisfaction from seeing your garden grow.

■ **Bell peppers.** Red bell peppers provide three times as much vitamin C as oranges. Nutrient dense, they're also good sources of vitamins A, B-6 (an especially heart-healthy nutrient), beta-carotene and folate.

■ **Eggplant.** This vegetable's main virtue: robust flavor and super satisfaction for very few calories. However, eggplant absorbs more fat than any other vegetable, so choose your cooking method wisely. Try broiling, roasting, grilling or stewing rather than frying.

■ **Peas.** If you want a sweet and satisfying low-calorie source of protein, think peas. About three-quarter cup of peas contains as much protein as an egg and less than a gram of fat.

■ **Romaine lettuce.** Rich in vitamins A and C and folate, romaine is a more nutritious alternative to pale iceberg lettuce. In general, the darker the leaves, the more nutrient-packed the salad green.

■ **Snap beans.** Green and wax beans are chock-full of beta-carotene and vitamin C. They're also good sources of heart-healthy folate.

■ **Summer squash.** Summer squashes are a mild but refreshing nine-calorie-a-cup addition to many dishes. (Tip: Eat squashes with their skins to reap the beta-carotene benefit.)

■ **Tomatoes.** A leading source of vitamin C, tomatoes have been heralded as a good-for-your-heart food as well. That's because they contain lycopene, an antioxidant that appears to have heart-protective powers. The only catch: To benefit from lycopene, the tomatoes must be cooked. ■



Should you eat organic?

Foods labeled “organic” certainly cost more than traditional offerings, but what does organic mean—and what are you actually getting for your money?

The term organic means fruits and vegetables are grown without artificial fertilizers or pesticides. Organic animal products such as meat and eggs come from animals that are fed 100-percent organic food, aren’t given antibiotics or growth hormones and have access to the outdoors. Foods that bear the voluntary “USDA Organic” sticker are grown, handled and processed in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines.

Right now, no research proves that organic foods are better for you nutritionally or that they’re safer than their nonorganic equivalents. So when it comes to the organic-versus-conventional debate, it’s a personal choice. When deciding whether to go organic, consider these points:

- Pesticides can leave a residue on produce. Buying organic limits exposure to these chemicals, although experts say the amount of pesticides on produce doesn’t constitute a health risk.
- Organic foods cost more because the farming practices used are more labor intensive and the government’s organic regulations are strict. However, organic farming is generally kinder to the environment.

Labels 101

What exactly do those organic labels mean? Learn the lingo:

- **100 percent organic** means products are completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.
- **Organic** products are at least 95 percent organic.
- **Made with organic ingredients** means the product contains at least 70 percent organic ingredients, but the organic seal isn’t permitted.

- Is organic fruit—possibly shipped from thousands of miles away—better than locally grown produce that isn’t certified organic? Local foods certainly may be fresher. Some people say organic foods taste better, while others can’t tell the difference. If taste is the most important thing to you, going with the freshest vegetables—organic or not—is probably your best bet.
- Organic fruits and vegetables may spoil faster because they aren’t treated with preservatives. Their appearance may not be as appealing. ■

VA MidSouth Healthcare Network

www.visn9.va.gov/

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Louisville, KY 40206
(502) 287-4000

Toll free: 1-800-376-8387

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VA Medical Center

1540 Spring Valley Drive
Huntington, WV 25704
(304) 429-6741

(304) 429-6755

Toll free: 1-800-827-8244

www.huntington.va.gov/

TENNESSEE

James H. Quillen

VA Medical Center

PO Box 4000

Corner of Sidney and Lamont
Mountain Home, TN 37684

(423) 926-1171

Toll free: 1-877-573-3529

www.mountainhome.va.gov/

VA Medical Center

1030 Jefferson Avenue

Memphis, TN 38104

(901) 523-8990

Toll free: 1-800-636-8262

www.memphis.va.gov/

VA Tennessee Valley

Healthcare System

Alvin C. York Campus

3400 Lebanon Pike

Murfreesboro, TN 37129

(615) 867-6000

Toll free: 1-800-876-7093

www.tennesseevalley.va.gov/

Nashville Campus

1310 24th Avenue South

Nashville, TN 37212

(615) 327-4751

Toll free: 1-800-228-4973



Department of
Veterans Affairs

VA MidSouth Healthcare Network (10N9)

US Department of Veterans Affairs

1801 West End Avenue, Suite 1100

Nashville, TN 37203

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