



VISN 8
VA Sunshine Healthcare Network

Veterans HEALTH MATTERS

WELLNESS MAGAZINE FOR VETERANS IN FLORIDA, SOUTH GEORGIA & THE CARIBBEAN

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TAKE ONE HOME

INSIDE:
CONTAINING
A CHICKENPOX
OUTBREAK
IN SAN JUAN

FUN IN THE SUN

PUT SAFETY FIRST



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To Our Readers

Temperatures are rising and the days are getting longer – summer is here!

We all keep embarrassing secrets from friends and family, but it's not a good idea to keep secrets from your doctor. On page 3 read about the different kinds of secrets patients keep and why they need to be shared.



Thanks to the speedy response from the staff at the San Juan VA Medical Center in Puerto Rico, a potentially severe chickenpox outbreak was prevented. Good planning, decisive leaders and a great group of volunteers made the difference. The story is on pages 4-5.

There is hardly anything more enjoyable than soaking up the sun on one of our many beautiful beaches in Florida and in the Caribbean. On page 6, read about the ways you can enjoy being outdoors this summer while still protecting your skin from harsh UV rays.

Have a question for your VA health care team? You can now talk to them quickly and confidentially using "Secure Messaging" online. Enjoy 24-hour access to your health care team minus the long waits on the phone. Read about all the benefits on page 7.

Summertime means lush tropical fruits are in season. Find a recipe using sweet, nutritious mangoes on page 7.

Wishing you health and happiness this summer,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nevin M. Weaver".

Nevin M. Weaver, FACHE
VISN 8 Network Director

New Personalized Health Benefits Handbook for Veterans

Veterans enrolled in the VA health care system have begun to receive personalized booklets that explain their health care benefits and contain other useful information.

The new Health Benefits Handbook will provide a personalized listing of health benefits based on each Veteran's specific eligibility. The handbook will also have contact information for their local VA medical facilities, appointment scheduling information, guidelines for communicating with their clinical team and, as applicable, information about copays.

Distribution of the handbooks began in February with all 8.5 million Veterans enrolled in the VA's health care system scheduled to receive their handbooks by 2013. Veterans will receive updates to their individual handbooks to reflect changes to their benefits or eligibility.

For more information about the Health Benefits Handbook, visit www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhbk or call VA's toll-free number at 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Talking with Your Doctor – Some Secrets SHOULD be Shared

It's natural to hide embarrassing little secrets from our family and friends. But when it comes to your doctor, some secrets need to be shared. Your doctor has to know about certain behavior patterns and physical changes (even seemingly small things like changes in sleep patterns) in order to treat you now and in the future. And all information shared with your doctor is bound by doctor-patient confidentiality. Following are some potentially uncomfortable topics that you should discuss with your doctor.



- **Drinking and smoking** – Your doctor is not there to lecture you. He needs to know about all substance use to know the best way to treat you. A long-time heavy drinker should have his or her liver checked for potentially life-threatening conditions. The alcohol can also affect other prescription medications. Likewise, because smoking is a significant risk factor in many other diseases, smokers need to be monitored more closely.
- **Forgetfulness** – Many people think increased forgetfulness simply happens when you get older, however, there can also be medical reasons for forgetfulness. If you are concerned that you or someone you know may have a serious memory problem, talk with your doctor. Forgetfulness can be caused by many different conditions and your doctor can help you determine what may be causing your memory loss.
- **Sexual dysfunction** – Sexual dysfunction or loss of sex drive can simply be the side effects of certain severe medical conditions such as coronary heart disease or diabetes.
- **Seeing another doctor** – Let your VA health care team know of the treatments, tests and medications you have received from other non-VA doctors to prevent potentially deadly treatment conflicts.
- **Use of over-the-counter medicines, herbal supplements and vitamins** – Many over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies do not mix well with prescribed medications. Make sure you tell your doctor about all over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies you take.
- **Stress, depression or abuse** – If you are suffering from stress, depression, physical or emotional abuse or other related issues, your doctor can help, which may include referrals to other health care professionals. The VA has a wide range of mental health services available to Veterans in both inpatient and outpatient settings and diverse locations ranging from the main VA hospital to community and rural clinics. Some services can even be provided virtually (over the computer)—bringing care directly to you.
- **Defying doctor's orders** – If you find yourself disagreeing with what your doctor has prescribed for your condition (or if a certain medication isn't working), TELL THEM. Communication with your VA health care team is essential for good health. You and your team are working together to keep you as healthy as possible and avoid worsening your condition.
- **Sleep loss and excessive fatigue** – Many people ignore sleep issues, but these problems can quickly become chronic. There are many physical and emotional factors that can lead to restless sleep that are easily treated, but it could also indicate a more serious condition or illness.

Containing a Chickenpox Outbreak in San Juan



By Susan Wentzell

It was mid-December 2011 and the people of Puerto Rico, the Caribbean island-nation known for its idyllic beauty, were gearing up for the holidays. But for staff at the San Juan VA Medical Center (VAMC), it would be a holiday like none other. For them it would be a race against the clock to stop an outbreak of chickenpox, a highly contagious, potentially life-threatening illness. This would be a hard-fought race they would ultimately win...with good planning, clinical expertise, decisive leadership and a little help from some selfless volunteers.

It began on Dec. 12 when two nurses from the large, urban VA hospital's Community Living Center (CLC) called in sick with the suspected illness that typically includes an itchy, blister-like rash, headaches, fever and fatigue. Two days later, a CLC resident presented with a rash confirmed to be chickenpox. Within a short time there were 13 confirmed cases of chickenpox—11 staff and two patients.

San Juan routinely plans for emergencies and facility leaders immediately mobilized a team of experts from Infection Control, Infectious Disease, Pharmacy, and Emergency Management services who developed an aggressive strategy to stop the infection from spreading. A core group of key hospital staff formed an Incident Command Team and met daily to assess the situation and plan their next courses of action.

Stopping the Outbreak

“For many, chickenpox is a mild illness—but not for all,” said Kathleen Ruiz, Associate Director of Patient Care Services, VA Caribbean Healthcare System. It can have serious complications in adults and those with compromised immune systems. And because of how it spreads, we were told the outbreak might last three to six months. Our number one goal was to stop the outbreak as quickly as possible.”

Ruiz explained that they immediately screened all susceptible patients and staff on the affected units and sent potentially exposed employees who might not have been immune to chickenpox home on administrative leave. “We informed patients and staff, controlled entry to the affected units, and vaccinated those most at risk. And our communication campaign to inform the public, service organizations and government officials was very effective,” she stated.

The VISN 8 Emergency Management Office along with VISN 8 leaders and staff from the Veterans Health Administration and VA Central Office provided on-going communication and counsel to the San Juan team. Other coordinating agencies included the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the U.S. Department of Health (DOH), and Puerto Rico's DOH—which had something the VA hospital really needed, and quickly.

“Chickenpox can have serious complications

in adults and those with compromised immune systems.

Our number one goal was to **stop the outbreak** as quickly as possible.”

About 900 doses of the Varicella vaccine were needed—but getting that much initially proved to be a challenge, according to Cosme Torres-Sabater, San Juan area emergency manager.

“Puerto Rico’s Health Department had chickenpox vaccine for infants and children that is usually administered during the first years of school. However, we had hundreds of adults to vaccinate. Fortunately, the drug manufacturer had enough supply on hand and we were able to get what we needed,” Torres-Sabater said.

Getting the vaccine wasn’t the only challenge. The hospital was full and units affected by the outbreak had staff vacancies, which included the Community Living Center, a general medical floor, and the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU). Staff was out sick with chickenpox and others who had been exposed were sent home during the potentially infectious period.

“We needed help—especially on the MICU. We didn’t want to stop accepting critically ill Veterans which would have meant sending them to other facilities. The VA has the best medical care on the island,” Ruiz said.

Urgent Call for Help



An urgent call went out for volunteer RNs with some unique qualifications beyond their medical credentials, which included long term and critical care experience. To deploy to San Juan, nurses had to be immune to chickenpox and they also had to speak Spanish. And because it was December, there were concerns that willing volunteers might be in short supply due to the holidays.

Despite the challenges, the call was answered and seven of 11 volunteer nurses who met the deployment criteria were quickly identified by VISN 8 Emergency Management staff working closely with emergency managers from the network’s seven VA healthcare systems.

To recruit the additional four nurses who were needed, VISN 8 Network Director Nevin Weaver sent an official request for help to the Veteran Health Administration’s (VHA) Office of Emergency Management, triggering activation of National Emergency Medical Response Team (NEMRT) 3, one of three nationwide teams of volunteers who are “on alert” awaiting a call to deploy their skills in the event of an emergency.

The first of the volunteer RNs from across the country arrived on the island on December 22nd. “Thanks to Cosme, our emergency manager Milton Martinez, and others in VISN 8 and VHA, we got the expert help we needed quickly, and never had to go on diversion in the MICU,” Ruiz said.

For their part, San Juan staff went out of their way to extend the hospitality to their volunteer nurses for which Puerto Rico is so well known.

The last chickenpox case was reported on December 31st bringing the total number of those infected to 15:13 VA staff and two patients. All had mild cases of the illness and have fully recovered, according to Ruiz. “No patients were infected by staff and this is a tribute to the excellent infection control practices by our employees,” she said.

Meanwhile, almost 2,800 San Juan VAMC employees were screened and 429 staff have been vaccinated; however, the process continues. Employees are being offered the opportunity to take a chickenpox blood test which the CDC says is the only definitive way to know if someone is immune from the virus.



Grateful Volunteers

In a letter of appreciation to facility leadership a volunteer wrote, “Thank you...for going out of your way to ensure I saw Puerto Rico and didn’t miss my family as much during the holidays.” And another, “Your employees are some of the best I have worked with in all my years of medical experience. Please give them my thanks. I want to come back...but (next time) on vacation.”

SOAK UP THE SUN

BUT NOT TOO MUCH!

We all enjoy the feeling of the warm summer sun on our bare skin, and being out in the sun is actually beneficial – it is the single-best and most-neglected source of vitamin D, accounting for 90 percent of vitamin D production in the human body. But like most other things, exposure to sunlight is best in moderation.



There are three different kinds of skin cancer and all three are almost always linked to ultraviolet (UV) radiation exposure from the sun. But this doesn't mean you should shutter your blinds and hide indoors during daylight hours. By simply taking a few safety precautions, you can enjoy the sunlight while still keeping your skin safe from harmful UV rays.

TIPS FOR SUN SAFETY

- Wear sunscreen! One of the easiest ways to enjoy the outdoors while still protecting your delicate skin from dangerous UV rays is to generously apply sunscreen to all exposed areas. Dermatologists recommend a minimum Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of 15 to safeguard skin, though those with fair skin may want to seek a higher SPF up to 45. Water-resistant sunscreen is also available if you are in or around water. (**Note:** Your body will not produce vitamin D from sun exposure while you are wearing sunscreen.)
- Find shade. Natural shade offers another level of protection from the sun. Shaded areas are not adequate protection in place of sunscreen but some shade is better than none. For maximum coverage, seek trees with dense leaves that are near other trees and buildings.
- Dress the part. You don't need to be covered head-to-toe, but wearing a light cover-up over a bathing suit and sunglasses can help protect skin and eyes. Also wear a wide-brimmed hat. It protects the ears, nose, and head from sun exposure. The head and face are common sites for skin cancer.

RISK FACTORS FOR SKIN CANCER

All people should make an effort to protect their skin from the sun's rays, but some people are more at risk than others. Take extra precautions if any of these risk factors apply to you.

- A lighter natural skin color
- A family history of skin cancer
- A personal history of skin cancer
- Regular exposure to sunlight through work or play
- A history of sunburns early in life
- A history of indoor tanning
- Skin that burns, freckles, reddens easily or becomes painful in the sun
- Blue or green eyes
- Blond or red hair
- A large number of moles

Secure Messaging Is Here:

'Talking' On-Line to Your VA Health Care Team

Veterans who receive primary care services at a VA hospital or clinic in Florida, South Georgia or the Caribbean can now "talk" to their health care team quickly, safely and securely via e-mail.

The new communication tool is called "Secure Messaging" and it allows Veterans to communicate confidentially with their VA Primary Care team on-line. Secure messaging is for routine communication such as questions about an appointment, inquiring about a prescription or refill, or other non-urgent health care issues.



"Secure Messaging is a great service. When you have a nonurgent problem or issue, instead of calling on the phone and being placed on hold, you can send a message to your team by e-mail. I am directly connected with my VA provider and team—all from the comfort of my home."

- Judy Berglund, U.S. Air Force Veteran and Tampa VA patient

Secure Messaging on-line saves Veterans time, money and best of all, it gives them 24-hour access to their health care team, according to VA physicians.

"Veterans avoid long hold times on the telephone and unlike an appointment, there are no co-pays. Also, patients feel more in control of their care and enjoy personalized attention from their providers," said Dr. Angela Denietolis, Associate Chief of Staff for Ambulatory Care, James A. Haley Veterans Hospital, Tampa, Fla.

Getting personalized wellness reminders and having access to VA laboratory and other test results are other benefits of Secure Messaging. And of course, Veterans can use the VA Blue Button to download, print or save their Personal Health Record.

To take advantage of Secure Messaging, Veterans first need to create an account on My HealtheVet (MHV). Next, they need to upgrade their MHV account by watching a brief on-line video and downloading a VA Release Form which can be dropped off at the VA hospital or clinic where they are enrolled for care during their next visit. They can also complete the form at the VA facility. To complete this one-time In-Personal Verification (IPA) process, they will need to show a government issued VA identification card, driver's license or passport.

For more information on My HealtheVet and the many features of Secure Messaging, Veterans should visit www.myhealth.va.gov. They can also talk to their VA health care provider or the MHV coordinator at their facility.

Jamaican Jerk Chicken Salad

Summertime means lush, juicy tropical fruits, and mangoes are some of the best. Bursting with antioxidants and over 20 different vitamins and minerals, mangoes are a sweet treat that is also highly nutritious! This fiber-rich fruit goes great simply sliced over oatmeal, yogurt and salads, but sweet mango slices are a perfect pairing with this lean grilled chicken with jerk seasoning.

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup prepared or purchased honey-mustard dressing
- 1 teaspoon lime juice
- 4 chicken breast halves without skin, boneless
- 1 tablespoon Jamaican jerk seasoning (available in the spice section of any store)
- 2 large fresh mangoes, sliced
- 10 to 12 cups mixed greens

Directions

1. Stir together honey-mustard dressing and lime juice. Cover and chill dressing while preparing chicken.
2. Rinse chicken and pat dry; sprinkle with the jerk seasoning.
3. In a large skillet cook the seasoned chicken in hot oil over medium-high heat about six minutes on each side until browned and no longer pink. Thinly slice each chicken breast.
4. Arrange warm chicken and mango atop greens on four plates; drizzle with the honey-mustard dressing.

Serves 4. 112.3 calories, 1.0g fat.





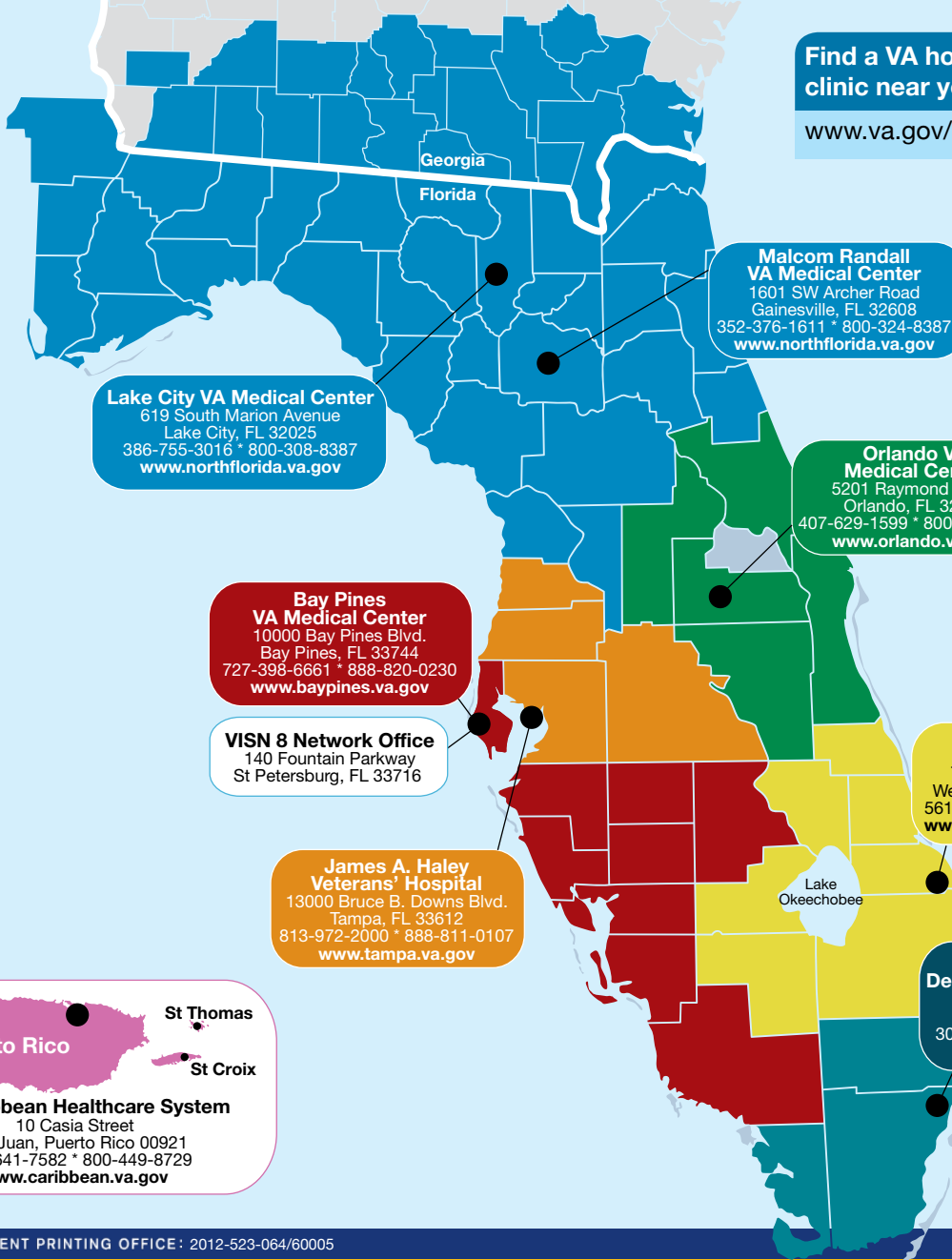
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To enroll or renew your VA health benefits, call 1-877-222-VETS (8387), Monday thru Friday between 8AM and 8PM (Eastern Time). You can also go on-line at www.va.gov/healthbenefits. Click "VA Health Care - Apply Now"

For medical care and clinic appointments, call your local VA health care facility.

VA Sunshine Healthcare Network
www.visn8.va.gov



Find a VA hospital or clinic near you:
www.va.gov/health/FlndCare.asp

Lake City VA Medical Center
619 South Marion Avenue
Lake City, FL 32025
386-755-3016 * 800-308-8387
www.northflorida.va.gov

Malcom Randall VA Medical Center
1601 SW Archer Road
Gainesville, FL 32608
352-376-1611 * 800-324-8387
www.northflorida.va.gov

Orlando VA Medical Center
5201 Raymond Street
Orlando, FL 32803
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www.orlando.va.gov

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