



Substance Abuse

For decades a leader in the field of addiction research, VA Research continues to support a broad portfolio examining substance-abuse prevention, screening, and treatment, including studies aimed at understanding the genetic factors that may predispose people to alcohol or drug abuse and addiction. One area of particular focus is improving substance-abuse treatment for homeless veterans.

Examples of VA research advances

- **Predicting relapse after alcohol abuse treatment**—VA researchers compared remission and long-term relapse rates among people with alcohol-use disorders who entered treatment or Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) within their first year of seeking help and those who did not initially obtain treatment or join AA. They found that those who entered treatment or AA early on were far more likely to be remitted after 3 years and to stay remitted even after 16 years. The researchers said the findings support the notion that “natural remission”—getting sober without formal treatment or help—may be less stable than remission that comes about through participation in AA or treatment.
- **Study tracks cognitive impairment**—In a study at the Jackson, Mississippi, VA Medical Center, veterans entering treatment for alcohol or substance abuse were administered cognitive and memory tests. Significant impairments were found in about a third of the nearly 300 veterans in the study. The researchers hope to draw attention to the implications of their findings for clinicians and counselors interested in identifying barriers to treatment compliance and retention.
- **VA screening program a success**—In 2004, VA implemented a nationwide annual screening for alcohol misuse. A recent study showed that VA successfully implemented the new screening program in more than 800 outpatient clinic sites nationwide. Based on medical record reviews, 93 percent of VA outpatients were screened for alcohol misuse, with a quarter of these veterans testing positive during a one-year period.

Facts About Substance Abuse

In fiscal year 2006, more than 354,000 veterans received care in VA for substance-use disorders (SUD)—i.e., alcohol or drug abuse or addiction. More than half of these patients also had a psychiatric disorder. In addition to those treated for SUD, nearly 45,000 veterans received care for nicotine dependence. The overwhelming majority of SUD patients in VA—some 96 percent—are men. The most common drugs being used by veterans treated for SUD is cocaine. Overall, the number of veterans being treated for SUD has risen some 22 percent over the past four years.

