

# Veterans' Healthy Living

VA NEW ENGLAND HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

SUMMER 2002

7 reasons  
to get fit

Winning the  
cholesterol  
numbers game

Preventing  
heatstroke



# MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.

The Department of Veterans Affairs announced in June 2002 that Phase II of the CARES (Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services) planning initiative is beginning nationwide. The goal of CARES is to ensure that veterans receive quality health care today and in the future by directing our resources where they are most needed.

At this point, the CARES office in VA Central Office is gathering information and data about our network to conduct a market analysis of veterans' health care needs. The CARES process is based on objectivity and consistency for all networks and will take place over the next 18 months. We will keep you and other stakeholders informed and seek your input as this process moves forward. For your convenience, you may submit comments throughout the CARES process on our Network Web site at: <http://www.visn1.med.va.gov/cares/commentform.asp>. Once the CARES process is completed, VA will be able to provide accessible care to more veterans in more locations. Let me assure you that, along with the 8,800 employees in Network 1, I remain dedicated to providing quality health care to the veterans of New England. I am committed to building on our record of excellence and improving and expanding care for veterans. To accomplish this goal, we must use our available resources as wisely and efficiently as possible.

I am pleased to share with you recent findings that validate the outstanding quality care that we provide in VA. Compared to our private-sector counterparts, VA outperforms private health care organizations in 16 of 18 clinical areas. As with VA, Network 1 exceeded the "best reported" performance data from private-sector outcomes in cardiovascular disease management, cancer screening, diabetes management and preventive health. VA is a recognized leader in providing quality health care, in part, because of an emphasis on the use of clinical practice guidelines and systemwide performance measures.

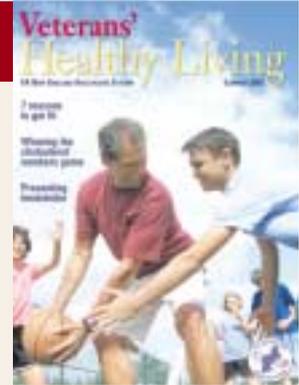
We recently completed the *Veterans' Healthy Living* survey from the Spring 2002 issue. Thank you for the more than 3,000 cards and letters that we received. More than 83 percent of the respondents let us know they find the newsletter very helpful. I am happy to announce that Edward V. Simonelli, a World War II Coast Guard veteran from West Haven, Conn., is the winner of the \$50 VA Canteen gift certificate. For more information on the survey results, turn to page 7.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge recent prestigious awards given to two of our providers. Dr. Satish Sharma, acting chief, Specialty and Acute Care Service Line for our network and board-certified cardiologist at Providence VAMC, was selected as the national VFW Outstanding VA Health Care Employee of the Year. This award acknowledged Dr. Sharma's significant contributions to improving the health and well-being of veterans. Esterbina Irizarry, nursing assistant from Northampton VAMC, was recently awarded the 2002 Secretary's Award for Excellence in Nursing. Ms. Irizarry was cited for her demonstrated compassion and understanding in the delivery of health care to the geriatric population. Congratulations to them both for these significant achievements!

Finally, this issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living* presents features on heatstroke, managing cholesterol and exercise as well as important information on the VA means test and military sexual trauma.

Have a healthy, safe summer!

Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.  
Network Director



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“Don’t get too hot or you’ll get heatstroke!” urged grandmother as you headed out to play. Remember the warning? Well, she was probably right.

Heatstroke is one of the oldest recorded diseases and is even cited in the Bible. Medically, three forms of heat-induced illnesses can occur on hot summer days. In order of increasing severity, they are: heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heatstroke.

#### THE THREE TYPES

**Heat cramps**, a mild form of heat disease, are characterized by painful muscle contractions. They occur when fluid and electrolytes are lost through excess sweating. Treatment for heat cramps is rest and fluid replacement.

**Heat exhaustion** has more severe symptoms and is characterized by profuse sweating, muscle cramps, fainting or light-headedness, giddiness and possibly vomiting. The body temperature usually is normal.

Treatment for heat exhaustion includes drinking sips of cool liquids, resting in a cool environment that’s out of the sun and wearing loose clothing.

“Although many people used to take salt tablets when working in the sun or participating in sporting events, such tablets aren’t recommended and could be dangerous,” stated Dr. Arthur Robins, assistant chief of staff, VA Boston Healthcare System. “We’ve found that a regular diet and typical replacement fluids contain plenty of salt and electrolytes for normal circumstances.” Just drink plenty of fluids in advance to avoid both these situations!

**Heatstroke** is a very serious condition that affects major organs like the heart and kidneys and causes confusion and altered consciousness. It typically occurs during strenuous activity under very hot and humid conditions.

Normally, our brains control our body temperature, like a thermostat. But in heatstroke, the thermostat is disturbed, allowing the body temperature to soar. True heatstroke is characterized by body temperatures greater than 106°F; hot, dry skin; and delirium, stupor or coma. “An overheated, confused person who is no longer sweating needs urgent medical attention,” cautioned Dr. Robins. “It is a true medical emergency.”

Persons who run a particular risk of heatstroke include athletes, military recruits, children left in closed



*Take care in  
the sun and heat  
to safeguard  
your health.*

## Summer watchword for heat-induced illness

cars, obese people, alcoholics, older people (especially those with heart disease and diabetes) and persons not acclimated to high temperatures and humidity.

#### WHAT TO DO

If persons are struck by heatstroke, call 911 first. Then, start working on reducing the fever. Bring them indoors to a cool room and remove their clothing. Bathe them with a sponge soaked in cool water, wrap a wet sheet around them or immerse them in a bathtub filled with cool water. Convulsions may occur, so remove objects they could hit.

Medications such as some antidepressants and tranquilizers, certain antihistamines, diuretics and Parkinson’s disease medications can interfere with normal perspiration. Check with your VA health care provider if the medicines you take fall into these categories.

“The best treatment for heatstroke and all heat-related illness is prevention,” Dr. Robins said. Don’t exercise beyond your physical conditioning level and don’t stay out in the sun too long when the temperature or humidity are high, particularly if you aren’t used to such conditions. If you begin to feel weak, nauseated, dizzy or tired when it’s hot, drink plenty of fluids and rest in a cool place.

Listen to Grandma!

# Winning the numbers game

## Lower cholesterol to stack the odds in your favor

**I**n an effort to promote heart health, a new national pastime has emerged—watching our cholesterol. If you're a player of this "numbers game," aim for a lower score to improve your chances of beating heart disease and stroke.

### UNDERSTANDING THE GAME

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that has both good and bad effects on your body. It is used for producing hormones and building nerve cells. Most of the cholesterol in your blood is made by your liver from the fats, carbohydrates and proteins you eat. You also get cholesterol by eating animal products such as meat, eggs and dairy.

When your body has too much cholesterol, deposits of fat in the blood called plaque form inside blood vessel walls. Plaque can clog blood vessels and impair blood flow. This condition, called atherosclerosis, can lead to heart



Esterbina Irizarry, N.A., Northampton VAMC, recipient of the 2002 Secretary's Award for Excellence in Nursing, helps veteran patient Roland Remington manage a healthy lifestyle. (Photo by Brenda O'Donnell)

attack and stroke. According to Dr. Michael Gaziano, director, Massachusetts Veterans Epidemiology Research and Information Center (MAVER-IC), VA Boston HCS, "Recent studies indicate that lowering blood cholesterol levels will greatly reduce your risk of developing coronary artery disease by as much as 40 percent."

### THE BAD—AND THE GOOD

Two types of lipoproteins carry cholesterol through the blood: low-density lipoproteins (LDL) and high-density lipoproteins (HDL). LDLs

carry cholesterol through the bloodstream but leave fatty deposits on artery walls, which contribute to heart disease. "The higher the LDL cholesterol level in the blood, the greater the heart disease risk," noted Dr. Gaziano. "For this reason, it is known as the 'bad' cholesterol."

HDL is the "good" cholesterol because it picks up harmful LDL cholesterol and carries it to the liver to be eliminated. This prevents fatty buildup in blood vessels. Low HDL levels, therefore, increase heart disease risk. In women, the HDL cholesterol is the most important predictor of heart disease.

Simply put, the higher your LDL cholesterol levels, the more likely you are to form plaque in your arteries. The higher your HDL cholesterol levels, the less likely you are to form plaque. Once you know this, it's easy to see the importance of lowering your overall cholesterol levels and tackling the bad cholesterol.

### WOMEN AND CHOLESTEROL

For women, the loss of estrogen with age may compli-

### CHOLESTEROL LEVELS AND HEART DISEASE RISK

The guidelines below apply to people older than 20 who do not have heart disease. (Patients with heart disease should make every effort to keep LDL levels below 100 mg/dL.)

Item measured	Level (mg/dL)		
	Desirable	Borderline	Too high
Total cholesterol	<200	200–239	>240
LDL cholesterol	<130	130–159	>160
LDL/HDL ratio	<3:1	3:1–5:1	>5:1
HDL cholesterol	>45	35–45	<35

cate the situation. Studies have shown that cholesterol levels tend to rise as a woman ages, especially around ages 50 to 55. Losing estrogen may be the reason. Experts believe estrogen lowers the bad cholesterol and raises the good. It also seems to keep the artery walls flexible.

“There are a number **of** ways postmenopausal women can improve lipids, including diet, exercise and lipid-lowering drugs, if needed. Given recent reports about the use of estrogen replacement, it remains unclear if hormone replacement therapy should be used. Women should discuss the use of replacement hormones with their VA healthcare provider,” advised Dr. Gaziano.

#### BEATING THE ODDS

You should have your cholesterol checked periodically. How often depends on your age, gender and family risk of heart disease. If you have high cholesterol, your VA health care provider can advise you. What can you do to reduce your cholesterol levels? Plenty. Eating right can help lower bad cholesterol. You can raise your good cholesterol by exercising, quitting smoking and losing weight. “Combining a healthy lifestyle and medication have been very successful in lowering cholesterol levels,” stated Dr. Gaziano. “If you exercise and eat right, you may be able to get by with less medication and with fewer side effects.” Be sure and consult with your health care provider before making any medication changes.

#### UNDER CONTROL

Here are more tips to get those cholesterol numbers in line:

- Choose an overall balanced diet with foods from the major food groups, emphasizing fruits, vegetables and grains.
- Avoid fried foods. Eat broiled or grilled fish, skinless chicken and lean cuts of meat. Fish is a must since it contains omega-3 fatty acids, which reduces the risk of heart disease.
- Eat more fiber; aim for eating at least 30 grams per day.
- Limit your intake of saturated fats, cholesterol and trans fatty acids (foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils such as some margarines). Instead, use liquid fats like canola and olive oils.
- Check nutrition labels for saturated fat content in packaged foods. Watch for hidden fats in cookies, crackers and chips.
- Avoid foods high in dietary cholesterol, such as egg yolks and liver.
- Try soy protein on occasion as an alternative to animal products.
- Enjoy a cup of green tea every now and then. Studies suggest it may help lower high cholesterol.
- Take up a sport or fun exercise.

#### SUMMER VEGETABLE SPAGHETTI

This lively vegetarian pasta dish contains no added fat or oil, is low in cholesterol, and is good hot or cold.

2 cups small yellow onions, cut in eighths  
2 cups chopped, peeled, fresh ripe tomatoes (about 1 lb.)  
2 cups thinly sliced yellow and green squash (about 1 lb.)  
1½ cups cut fresh green beans (about ½ lb.)  
⅔ cup water  
2 Tbsp. minced fresh parsley  
1 clove garlic, minced  
½ tsp. chili powder  
¼ tsp. salt  
black pepper to taste  
1 can (6 oz.) tomato paste  
1 lb. uncooked spaghetti  
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Combine first 10 ingredients in large saucepan; cook 10 minutes, then stir in tomato paste. Cover and cook gently, 15 minutes, stirring occasionally until vegetables are tender. Cook spaghetti in unsalted water following package directions. Spoon sauce over drained hot spaghetti and sprinkle with cheese.

Serves 9. Serving size: 1 cup spaghetti and ¾ cup sauce with vegetables. Each serving provides 279 calories, 3 g. total fat, 1 g. saturated fat, 4 mg. cholesterol, 173 mg. sodium.

Recipe courtesy of the National Institute of Health, National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. For additional heart-healthy recipes, go to [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/other/syah/](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/other/syah/)



# 7 reasons to get fit



**E**xercise takes too much time and too much effort for a payoff that's long in coming, right? Wrong! You may not build and tone muscle overnight, but from the moment you begin a regular fitness program, you'll enjoy the benefits.

"If I had a medication that provided the same benefits that exercise does, I'd be a rich man," noted Dr. Michael Gaziano, director, Massachusetts Veterans Epidemiology Research and Information Center (MAVERIC) at VA Boston HCS. "Exercise doesn't need to be strenuous—taking a 30-minute walk most days of the week is recommended."

Benefits of exercise include:

**1. Better weight control.** By building muscle, you'll burn more calories, which will help keep your weight stable.

**2. A primed cardiovascular system.** The physically fit are eight times less likely to die from heart attacks or strokes.

**3. Stress-free living.** Tension has a way of evaporating along with your sweat.

**4. Strong bones.** Walking, running or other weight-bearing exercises will lower the risk of brittle bones, or osteoporosis, for both men and women.

**5. Control over diabetes.** Exercise reduces the need for insulin and your chances of developing adult-onset diabetes. For diabetics, regular exercise may reduce the need for medication.

**6. A good night's sleep.** Exercise helps people fall asleep faster, sleep sounder and wake feeling refreshed.

**7. Round-the-clock energy.** Regular exercisers don't tire as easily. It also makes you look younger, stand straighter, and helps avoid back pain.

## BEST WAYS TO GET MOVING

Exercise is easier said than done for many people, but there's always something you can do. "Put exercise on your 'to do' list along with taking your medications," Dr. Gaziano suggested. To get and stay motivated try these tips:

- Set measurable and attainable goals.
- Don't make weight loss a goal. The results can be discouraging!
- Find a fitness buddy to encourage each other.
- Try different forms of exercise until you find something you like. Make fitness fun!
- Keep an exercise calendar and star each day that you exercise. When you reach a fitness goal, treat yourself to something new.

Don't take on too much too soon. You might start with 10 minutes of exercise a day and build up to 30 minutes a day in a month. And always check with your VA health care provider before beginning a routine.

## GET FIT IN 30 MINUTES A DAY

"For maximum benefit, exercise should be done in a continuous block," Dr. Gaziano stated. "However, if you can't find a block of time to work out, don't worry." The key is making movement an ordinary part of your day. Try these tips:

- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Park at least a two-minute walk from your destination.
- Take public transportation and get off a stop or two before your destination.
- Play with your kids.
- Devote time to vigorous housecleaning. Mop, wash windows, vacuum under the furniture—not around it!
- Schedule five-minute walking breaks throughout the day.
- Do leg lifts and arm curls without leaving your desk.



## Updated means tests more important than ever!

On January 11, 2002, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) issued VHA Directive 2002-001 to block scheduling of outpatient appointments for any veteran with an expired means test. Simply put, some nonservice-connected and some 0 percent service-connected veterans may not receive future medical appointments if they do not complete the required annual means test.

Veterans who complete a means test and who are unable to defray the expenses of medical care are not required to pay a medical care copayment. However, a new means test must be completed each year. If a new means test is not completed, the veteran is placed in a nonenrolled status and cannot schedule any appointments until a new means test is completed. Veterans will receive a financial assessment (means test) renewal letter and 10-10EZ, Application for Health Benefits, 60 days prior to the veteran's means test anniversary date. Please be sure to complete and return this form to ensure uninterrupted scheduling of appointments. Questions may be directed to VA Veterans Service Centers or call **1-877-222-VETS (8387)**.

## VA to provide military sexual trauma screening

Some veterans, both men and women, suffered sexual trauma while serving on active military duty. Military sexual trauma is defined as sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape and other acts of sexual violence that occurred while serving on active military duty. These veterans might still struggle with fear, anxiety, embarrassment or profound anger as a result. Undiagnosed and untreated sexual trauma can increase physical complaints, such as sleeplessness, fatigue and changes in appetite. Emotionally, a victim may complain of depression, mood swings and loss of relationships.

If you suffer from the effects of sexual trauma in the service, VA may be able to help you. Through passage of the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act, Public Law 106-117, VA must screen for military sexual trauma in all enrolled male and female veterans who use VA services. This law also stipulates that veterans will not be billed for services related to military sexual trauma. VA health care providers will soon ask all veterans who seek care at VA medical centers and clinics throughout VISN 1 if they experienced military sexual trauma. VA providers understand the sensitive nature of this issue and respect the need to keep information confidential. Those veterans who experienced such trauma will be offered a referral for evaluation and counseling. Initial care and any follow up will be provided at no cost to the veteran.

## Veterans' Healthy Living survey results

More than 3,000 veterans responded to the Spring 2002 *Veterans' Healthy Living* survey. Below is a summary of the results, which will be used to develop future issues.

- 83% rated *Veterans' Healthy Living* as very or extremely helpful.
- 99% wish to continue receiving the newsletter.
- Top 10 health topics:
  - Heart problems
  - Diabetes
  - Arthritis
  - Cancer
  - Nutrition
  - Exercise/fitness
  - High blood pressure
  - Prostate
  - Weight control
  - Eye problems
- Top 5 services of interest:
  - Benefits available to veterans and dependents
  - Long-term care
  - Updates on benefits
  - Copayment changes
  - Prescription/pharmacy benefits
- 11% switched to e-mail delivery of the newsletter.

Now you can receive *Veterans' Healthy Living* almost as soon as it's written! To sign up for e-mail delivery, go to: [www.visn1.med.va.gov/newsletter/](http://www.visn1.med.va.gov/newsletter/)

## Benefits information available

The VA Health Benefits Call Center averages between 3,000 and 3,500 inquiries a day from veterans asking about virtually every aspect of VA health benefits. To get your benefits questions answered, call toll free **1-877-222-VETS (8387)** or go to the VA Web site at [www.va.gov/elig](http://www.va.gov/elig).

## Attention, Veterans' Healthy Living readers

We receive many address changes from veterans and also hear from families of recently deceased veterans. The best way to update VA and us about these changes is to notify the medical center where the veteran received care. Not only will that keep your medical records up to date, it will also automatically correct our newsletter mailing list.

# Where to find us



## VA MEDICAL CENTERS

### CONNECTICUT

VA CT HEALTHCARE SYSTEM  
Newington Campus  
555 Willard Avenue  
Newington, CT 06111  
(860) 666-6951

West Haven Campus  
950 Campbell Avenue  
West Haven, CT 06516  
(203) 932-5711

### MAINE

TOGUS VAM&ROC  
1 VA Center  
Togus, ME 04330  
(207) 623-8411  
(within the Augusta area)  
(877) 421-8263  
(outside the Augusta area)

### MASSACHUSETTS

EDITH NOURSE ROGERS  
VETERANS MEMORIAL  
HOSPITAL  
200 Springs Road  
Bedford, MA 01730  
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### VA BOSTON HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Jamaica Plain Campus  
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Jamaica Plain, MA 02130  
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West Roxbury Campus  
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