

Veterans' Healthy Living

VA NEW ENGLAND HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

WINTER 2004

**You don't
have to live with
leg pain**

**Does age
affect
how safely
you drive?**

**Health care
services without
leaving your home!**



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.

The Veterans Health Administration is committed to offering a patient-centered health care system that leads the way in health information technology. We demonstrate this commitment in advances such as telemedicine and the electronic patient record—two key ways to help clinicians provide quality health care. Recently, VA launched Phase I of another exciting technological innovation: a new Web-based program called My Health_eVet.

My Health_eVet helps veterans explore health topics, view seasonal health reminders and more. Soon, My Health_eVet will also help veterans access valuable, timesaving services, such as refilling prescriptions online, viewing next appointment dates and times and checking co-payment balances. And, when the health record section becomes available, veterans will be able to view and maintain copies of key portions of their secure personal health records from VA's health information system, Health_eVet/VistA. Visit My Health_eVet's Web site at www.myhealth.va.gov/.

Another priority VA is focused on is to ensure that recently discharged veterans receive high-quality, timely services and that their transition into the VA system is as seamless as possible. Many young men and women are returning home from serving abroad in Afghanistan and Iraq. Discharged veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom can receive VA medical care for two years from their military discharge date for conditions related to their military service—regardless of their income or eligibility status. Contact your local medical center for more information.

As we go to press, the CARES Commission is about to make its recommendations on the draft National CARES Plan to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The purpose of CARES is to provide more care, to more veterans, in more places where veterans need services most. The Plan's goals include finding savings and reinvesting them in doctors, nurses and modern health care equipment—resources crucial to direct-patient care, both today and in the future. The Secretary is expected to make his final decision on the Plan in early 2004. For more information on the latest CARES developments, visit the CARES Web site at www.va.gov/cares/.

This issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living* includes health articles on Home-Based Primary Care, peripheral vascular disease and safe driving. We hope you find them informative.

Best wishes for a safe, healthy winter!

Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.
Network Director

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You don't have to live with leg pain

Do you suffer from chronic leg pain, aches and fatigue? Are you unable to climb a flight of stairs, dance to your favorite song or walk to a corner store without pain?

These may be signs that your vascular system, the network of veins and arteries that carries blood to and from your organs, isn't working well. Peripheral vascular disease (PVD)—clogged arteries in the periphery of your body, such as your arms or legs—is often the culprit of leg pain.

KNOW THE SIGNS

Though PVD primarily affects men and women over age 50, it can target patients at any age. Common PVD symptoms include pain and weakness in the legs while walking or exercising that subsides with rest. Other telltale signs are numbness and coldness in the lower legs and feet.

Before diagnosing you with PVD, your health care provider will take a medical history, a physical exam and other appropriate tests. Your provider will also rule out other nonvascular conditions that can lead to leg pain, such as arthritis.

EASE THE PAIN

If your doctor determines that clogging of your leg arteries is causing your leg pain, he or she will prescribe treatment that may relieve your symptoms and



stop your disease from progressing. Common treatments involve changing lifestyle behaviors with preventive measures, such as:

- **Walking.** The best therapy for PVD is to walk a total of 30 minutes a day.
- **Eating a healthy diet.** A healthy meal plan includes low-fat foods, fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains.
- **Stopping smoking.** Smoking increases your chances of developing or worsening PVD.

If modifying your lifestyle doesn't ease your leg pain, you may have other treatment options, such as medication, to improve circulation. Severe cases of PVD may require more aggressive treatment.

If you have leg pain or think you may have PVD, contact your primary care doctor. Effective treatment can help you resume your normal activities and enjoy life more.



PREVENTING PVD

Take these steps to decrease your risk of peripheral vascular disease:

- Get regular exercise.
- Change your diet.
- Stop smoking.
- Lower your cholesterol.
- Lower your blood pressure.
- Control your diabetes.

Health care services without leaving your home!

Home-Based Primary Care helps you stay independent while caring for your special needs

As a nation, we are getting older. At the beginning of the 20th century, the average life span of an American was 50 years. By the end of the 20th century, it had increased to more than 70 years. As our life span continues to increase, a significant number of us may live for several years with well-controlled chronic diseases.

At-home care can be a good solution for both veterans and their loved ones. Because it provides needed support with daily routines and medical assistance, it lets families focus on quality time together rather than worrying about special needs.

WHAT IS HOME-BASED PRIMARY CARE?

VA offers a unique program for this purpose: Home-Based Primary Care (HBPC). Corrine Smith, R.N., network service line director for Geriatrics and Extended Care, said, "It is VA's mission to provide needed services to our veterans. Home care is one way of doing that, while at the same time satisfying the needs of the patients and their families."

AM I ELIGIBLE FOR HBPC?

If you are enrolled in the VA New England Healthcare System Veterans Health Administration, you are eligible for this type of care. "Enrolled" means you have a VA card and you receive your outpatient or inpatient care from a VA health care provider or a medical care provider who is contracted by VA to give you medical care.

HOW ILL MUST I BE TO RECEIVE THIS TYPE OF CARE?

Several criteria help determine if you can benefit from HBPC. You may be eligible if you have a complex disease that necessitates care by an interdisciplinary



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANN SPENCE

Joseph Bisson, Providence VAMC HBPC patient, receives at-home care from Marilyn Vincent, R.N., Providence HBPC nurse.

nary team, such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, dementia, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, coronary artery disease, cancer, AIDS and end-stage liver disease.

In addition, certain health factors determine your eligibility for HBPC. For example:

- Your disease affects your ability to travel for appointments.
- You are unable to drive.
- You have significant physical, functional or psychological impairments.
- Your disease has caused you to come to VA at least twice for inpatient care or emergency services within the last six months.
- You have made multiple, unscheduled emergency visits to Primary Care with serious disease symptoms.

Certain conditions also determine VA's ability to provide you with HBPC:

- You must live within 25 miles from where the HBPC program operates, usually at the local VA medical center or outpatient clinic.

■ Your physician or nurse practitioner must agree that your home is the most appropriate place for you to receive care.

■ Your home must be a safe place for you and the HBPC staff providing care.

Home-Based Primary Care helps veterans maintain quality of life and lifestyle.



HOW CAN HBPC HELP ME?

Many people feel skeptical about institutional care. They fear a loss of self-esteem and control over their lives. An overwhelming number of veteran patients have said they prefer to receive care at home.

VA is committed to helping veterans delay nursing home care for as long as possible. But the challenge lies in helping patients maintain quality of life and lifestyle. One way HBPC rises to this challenge is through advanced technologies like telemedicine. “We want to provide the right care, at the right time, in the right place and for the right cost,” Smith said. “Telemedicine helps health care providers communicate with patients and care for them in their homes without being physically present.”

WHO PROVIDES HBPC?

Several different types and levels of home care can help you:

■ **Professional nurses.** Professional nurses provide the most highly skilled level of care. Nursing care requires the education and background of a licensed professional.

■ **Health aides.** Although they don’t always have to be licensed, health aides are trained to assist people with daily-living activities, such as bathing, dressing and personal hygiene.

■ **Homemakers.** Homemakers aren’t licensed, but they are skilled in helping people prepare meals and do light housekeeping and laundry.

HOW WILL I PAY FOR HBPC?

VA provides home services to veterans who need or qualify for them. Veterans can share co-payments or receive full coverage if they qualify by income standards.

For additional information, contact your local VA primary care provider.

A heartwarming winter favorite

HOMEMADE TURKEY SOUP

Warm up this season and treat your body well with this nutritious, flavorful soup.

4–6 lb. turkey breast carcass
1 medium onion, chopped
2 stalks of celery, sliced
½ tsp. dried thyme
¼ tsp. dried rosemary
¼ tsp. dried sage
½ tsp. dried basil
¼ tsp. dried marjoram
¼ tsp. dried tarragon
¼ tsp. salt
black pepper to taste
¼ lb. Italian pastina or pasta



Place turkey breast carcass in a large 6-quart pot. It should have enough meat (at least 1 cup) on it to make a good, rich soup.

Cover with water, at least $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Peel onion, cut in large pieces and add to pot. Wash celery stalks, slice and add to pot.

Cover pot and simmer for about $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Remove carcass from pot. Divide soup into smaller, shallower

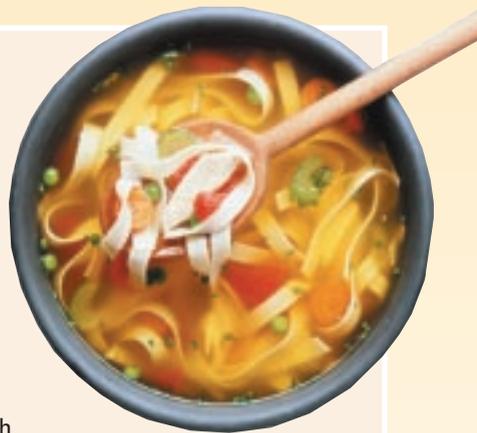
containers for quick refrigerator cooling.

After cooling, make your soup healthier by skimming the fat. Remove remaining meat from turkey carcass. Cut into pieces.

Add turkey meat to skimmed soup along with herbs and spices. Bring to a boil and add pastina. Continue cooking on low boil for about 20 minutes or until pastina is done. Serve at once or refrigerate.

Serves 8 (about 2 quarts of soup total, 1 cup per serving size). Each serving provides 226 calories, 5 g total fat, 1 g saturated fat, 93 mg cholesterol, 217 mg sodium.

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





movement and further evaluation of thought processes.”

VA provides special resources for older drivers. The VA Boston Healthcare System’s Brockton Campus offers a driving rehabilitation program for veterans that tests older drivers’ strengths and weaknesses. The test checks reaction time, movement, thinking ability and driving skills. “If you or a family member is interested in this evaluation, ask your VA clinician for more information,” advised Dr. Cantor.

Does age affect how safely you drive?

For most people, driving signifies independence, freedom, an active social life and emotional vitality. But your age can affect your driving ability—threatening the safety of yourself and others.

KNOW YOUR DRIVING ABILITY

Because people age at different rates, how old you are isn’t the only factor that determines your driving competence. But it can play a role. Drivers over age 50 may experience physical changes that affect their driving ability. For example, people with a higher risk of driving problems may include those who have:

- visual problems caused by cataracts or other eye diseases
- difficulty moving as a result of arthritis or stroke
- problems processing complex information caused by dementia, stroke or other diseases that affect the brain.

Dr. Michael Cantor, associate director for Clinical Affairs of VA New England Healthcare System Geriatric Research and Education Clinical Center (GRECC), Boston division, offered advice. “If you have one of the above illnesses, talk to your health care provider about how to maintain your driving,” he said. “A variety of treatment options can help you, such as glasses for visual problems, rehabilitation for muscle or joint

USE OTHER RESOURCES TO GET AROUND

If you do have to give up driving, plan for it in advance. Consider other transportation resources, such as catching rides with family members and friends, calling for taxis and taking advantage of community services. In some towns, professional driving rehabilitation specialists offer services. Talk with your health care provider about ways to safely get you where you need to go.

We all need to understand the importance of safe driving—regardless of our age. But as you get older, you can play an important role in keeping road conditions safe by testing your driving skills regularly. And should you have to give up your keys at some point, know that you can continue to lead an independent, fulfilling life.

WINTER-WEATHER DRIVING TIPS

Take these measures to reduce your accident risk:

- Maintain a safe speed.
- Leave plenty of room between your car and the one in front of you.
- Know what kind of brakes you have and how to use them properly on wet, icy or snowy roads.
- Remember that some medications can affect your alertness—even if taken two days before.
- Have a full tank of gas.
- Always maintain your car in road-ready condition, especially your tires, brakes, windshield wipers and fluids.
- Store a car-safety kit and first-aid kit in your trunk. Keep a flashlight, an ice scraper and a snowbrush handy.
- Always carry supplies to keep you warm, such as gloves, a cap and blankets.
- Avoid driving in bad weather or at night.
- Consider taking a driving refresher class from AAA or AARP.



TAKE A SAFE DRIVING QUIZ

Take the AAA Safe Driving Quiz to test your driving ability. Go to www.aaafoundation.org/quizzes.

For more information on safe driving, visit these Web sites:
www.aaa.com
www.aarp.org

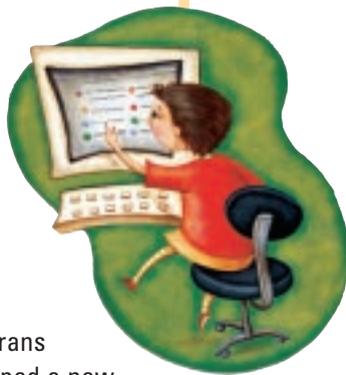
National Veterans Golden Age Games held in Maine

Approximately 500 veterans from 27 states enjoyed competing for a week at the 17th National Veterans Golden Age Games, held August 7–12, 2003. Activities included swimming, bicycling, horseshoes, bowling, croquet and a pentathlon. The event was held at the University of Maine at Orono, sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The Togus VA Medical Center hosted the event.



Above left: Golden Age Games team members from VA Connecticut (left to right) Fred Desjardins, Bobby Erf, Peter Falcione, Rick Galluzzi, Harold Gomes-Gomez, Sam Marabottini, Don Mullett and Phil Piskura earned nine medals. Right photos: Many veterans from across the country joined in the friendly competition.

New VA Web site helps kids learn about VA and vets



The Department of Veterans Affairs recently developed a new Internet site that will help young people understand what it means to be a veteran: “VA Kids” at www.va.gov/kids. The site offers three major sections: one for kindergarten through grade 5 students, one for grades 6 through 12 students and a final section for teachers. In addition to interactive activities like puzzles, coloring and matching contests, “VA Kids” provides information about VA, Veterans’ Day, scholarships and links to veteran-related sites. Teachers can click on their section for additional information, links and suggested classroom activities. The “VA Kids” Web site was recognized by *USA Today* as a “Best Bet” for its educational value.

Have questions about your VA billing statement?

VISN 1 now has a new toll-free phone number for veterans to call with their billing statements: the VISN 1 Call Center at **1 (866) 450-9099**.

Call Center staff members will take your calls from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. If calling after business hours, leave a voice mail message and staff members will return your call as soon as possible.

Put your health care choices in writing



Should you ever need to stay at a VA hospital, you’ll be asked about your preferences for care and offered the opportunity to complete an advance directive.

What is an advance directive? It’s a written document that will guide your loved ones and your doctor if you are not physically or mentally able to make your own health care decisions.

If you choose to write down your wishes, sign the document and have it notarized. Tell your loved ones you have completed it and make sure they know where to locate it if needed. You may also choose to complete an advance directive with a lawyer’s help.

Ask your health care provider for more information about available forms and care options.

Get vaccinated: It’s key to fighting the flu

During the winter months, your risk of getting influenza, or the flu, increases. The best way to protect yourself is to get vaccinated. VA provides the influenza vaccine to high-risk veterans and people who can transmit influenza to high-risk veterans. VA recommends vaccination for people ages 50–64 and those at increased risk for complications from influenza, including people over 65, residents of nursing homes and domiciliaries and adults who have chronic pulmonary or cardiovascular system disorders.

Where to find us

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VA CT HEALTHCARE SYSTEM
Newington Campus
555 Willard Avenue
Newington, CT 06111
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West Haven Campus
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West Haven, CT 06516
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MAINE

TOGUS VAMC

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Togus, ME 04330
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(within the Augusta area)
(877) 421-8263
(outside the Augusta area)

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EDITH NOURSE ROGERS
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HOSPITAL
200 Springs Road
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West Roxbury Campus
1400 VFW Parkway
West Roxbury, MA 02132
(617) 323-7700

Brockton Campus
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