

Providing Dental Care to Rural Veterans

The Geriatrics Scholars Program, sponsored in part, by the VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH), trains health care providers from rural Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in the most current science in geriatric care and in the principals of implementation science. Two Geriatric Scholars at the Grand Island CBOC in Central Nebraska, Janelle Brock, a licensed independent clinical social worker (LCSW) and Marjie Heier, MD, created a team to improve access to dental care for more than 10,000 rural Veterans. Two significant barriers that cause Veterans to neglect their oral health include low incomes and travel distance. Brock and Heier's team developed a collaborative relationship with local community agencies that offer dental care to low income individuals. Furthermore, the team partnered with a local church and volunteers to provide transportation for Veterans to dental clinics. Relevant medical records and medication lists were provided to community dental clinics so that dental care could be provided efficiently. After six months of this project's implementation, 151 Veterans were referred to community resources for dental care. Eighty-one (56%) of the individuals who were referred to a community dental clinic were confirmed to have been treated at that particular clinic. Currently, the project is being expanded to other rural VA clinics within Nebraska. ♦

Did You Know?

- Poor dental hygiene has been associated with an increase in morbidity and mortality due to renal failure and coronary artery disease.
- According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, anywhere from 8 to 17% of adults have periodontal disease. Periodontal disease is more common in older adults, African-Americans, Hispanics and smokers. Individuals with periodontal disease are 1.5-to-2 times more likely to suffer a fatal heart attack and nearly three times more likely to suffer a stroke.
- There are clear links between chronic oral infections and other health problems including diabetes, heart disease and adverse pregnancy outcomes.
- Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of deaths that can be prevented, accounting for about 1 in 5 deaths.
- A poor diet can lead to energy imbalance (e.g., eating more calories than one expends through physical activity) and can increase one's risk for overweight and obesity. ♦



Promoting Healthful Behaviors to Prevent Chronic Illness in Veterans

In 2000, three modifiable behaviors caused one-third of all deaths in the United States; these behaviors included: tobacco use, physical inactivity, and poor diet. Veterans, especially younger ones who have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, are at increased risk for smoking and obesity according to research sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Iraq and Afghanistan war Veterans are fifty percent more likely to use tobacco than their military peers who did not deploy. Tobacco use has increased among Veterans in the past several years due to factors such as combat exposure, reintegration challenges, and military culture. Many times, physical inactivity in Veterans can be due to stress, depression, substance and alcohol abuse, and sleep loss. Physical inactivity can result in obesity and can lead to chronic health complications such as diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, sleep apnea, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. There are multiple interventions, opportunities, polices, and systems that are being developed to assist in promoting healthful lifestyles for Veterans. Improving the nutrition of food that is served in VA hospital cafeterias, offering fitness classes at VA clinics, and providing access to free evidence-based tobacco use cessation aids are just some of the opportunities and policies that have been put in place. Furthermore, all Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are eligible for at least 5 years of care through the VA after they separate from military service. Veterans who have adopted healthful lifestyles have seen benefits such as reduced disease, improved fitness, and an enhanced quality of life. *Citation: Widome, R., Littman, A.J., Laska, M.N., Fu, S.S. (2012). Preventing Chronic Illness in Young Veterans by Promoting Healthful Behaviors. Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health, Research, Practice, and Policy. doi: 10.58888/pcd9.110132. ♦*

