



Veterans' Health

The wellness magazine for VA Capitol Health Care Network Veterans



Wellness 2001

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to better health

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What's Happening

☆☆☆ At VA

Medical Journal Praises VA Health Care

An editorial in the January 2001 edition of the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* calls VA's health care system "a laudable success."

"There have been many forces operating to promote the success of VA's efforts at quality improvement, including strong, effective leadership and an experienced, dedicated work force," says the editorial. "In most cases in which comparable statistics from the private sector exist, the performance of VA appears to be superior."

The editorial notes that VA is providing care at more sites to more veterans with fewer employees than five years ago, while becoming an industry leader in such areas as patient safety, the computerization of medical records, preventive screenings, and immunizations.



VA Sets Rules For Purple Heart Recipients

Under new VA rules, veterans awarded the Purple Heart for combat wounds now have a higher priority for health care services than before. Also, they don't have to make co-payments for inpatient or outpatient VA medical services.

The new rules authorize VA to reimburse Purple Heart recipients for any medical co-payments made to VA for care given after November 29, 1999. They are still responsible for co-payments of \$2 on prescriptions for conditions not related to a service-connected injury. ★

Exceeding Your Expectations

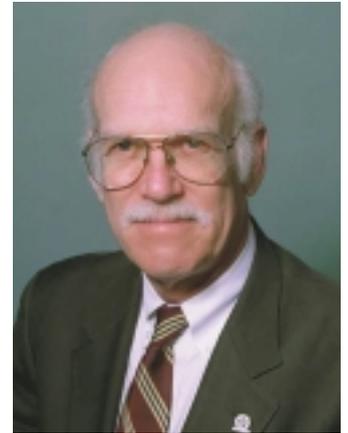
The VA has undergone a profound transformation in the delivery of health care over the last decade. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has developed strategic goals to continue this transformation that has established VA health care as second to none. Six goals have been set to focus on the quality of VA care, access to care, the functional status of our patients, veteran satisfaction, cost, and public health. VHA goals are to:

- put quality first until first in quality
- provide easy access to medical knowledge, expertise, and care
- enhance, preserve, and restore patient function
- exceed patient expectations
- save more dollars to serve more veterans
- build healthy communities

The VA Capitol Health Care Network has used these VHA strategic goals to set Network objectives for this coming year.

One of the first priorities we will tackle is increasing the number of veterans we serve. The drive to increase the number of veterans receiving primary and preventive care through the VA is the motivation behind a multifaceted marketing outreach campaign being implemented Network-wide.

The VA Capitol Health Care Network is working to increase the number of veterans being treated at our medical centers and community-based outpatient clinics to ensure the continued growth and development of our health care services. Patient retention is also crucial to the success of this campaign. Our goal is to exceed patient expectations and provide consistent, accessible, high-quality health care to all the veterans we serve.



James J. Nocks,
M.D., M.S.H.A.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James J. Nocks, M.D." with a stylized flourish at the end.

James J. Nocks, M.D., M.S.H.A.
Network Director

A month-by-month guide to better health

The days are getting longer, the sun is getting stronger—spring is here! And what better time to renew or reinforce your commitment to wellness? Maybe those New Year's resolutions weren't so easy to keep during the long winter months. Or maybe you did make some healthy changes and can continue to do so in the new season.

Either way, we are committed to helping you introduce healthy behaviors into your life. Implement our April, May, and June suggestions for fitness, nutrition, and overall well-being to take advantage of all the healthy possibilities of spring! And don't miss our summer wellness suggestions in the next issue of *Veterans' Health*. ★



April

- The weather's getting warmer and suddenly folks can be seen playing ball, hopping on their bikes, or taking leisurely strolls. Join the outdoor fun! Play Frisbee with your dog, take along a friend for a game of tennis, or organize a pick-up game of baseball with the kids.
- Spring is a great time to buy fresh produce. And, according to both the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association, eating at least five servings of fruits and/or vegetables each day will decrease your risk for cancer and heart disease. Fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants that counteract cellular damage throughout the body. Plus, they are delicious! So take advantage of nature's bounty of fresh produce this spring.
- When is the last time you went to the dentist? If you're like most people, it's probably been a while. Make an appointment with your dentist for a complete exam and professional cleaning. If you don't floss regularly, ask your dentist or hygienist for guidance and resolve to floss daily.

May

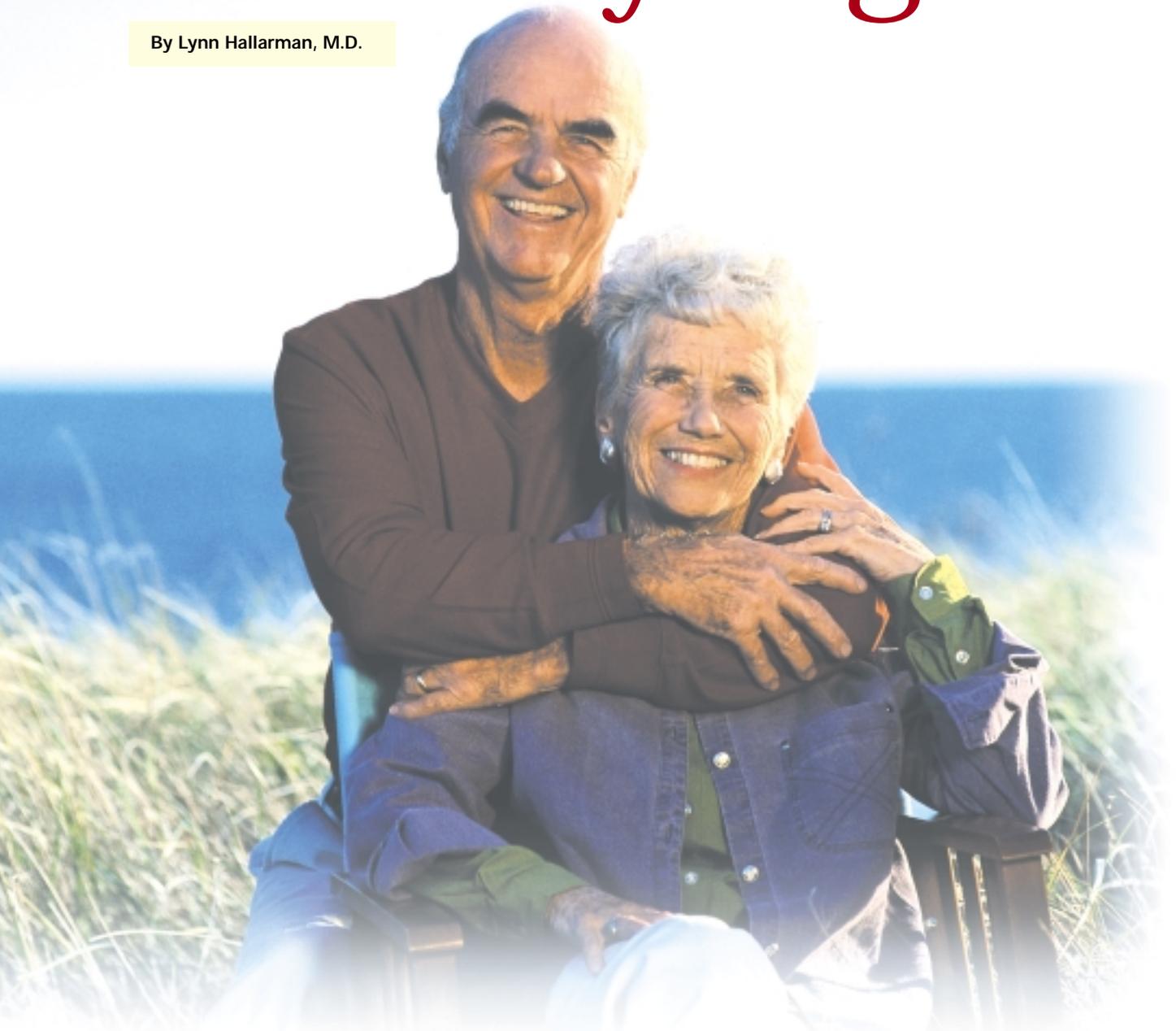
- Don't let stress weigh you down during this beautiful season. Stress is a part of life, but you can control how it affects you. Start by changing your perception of the problem that is causing you stress: Is it really as threatening as you believe? Realize that by controlling your response to stressful events, you can regain control of your life.
- Instead of walking the same old route, take a hike! Many wooded regions have marked walking trails that cater to every skill level. Your local, state, or city parks and recreation departments can give you information on nearby trails.
- For allergy sufferers, being outdoors in the spring can be no fun at all. Over-the-counter antihistamines and nasal sprays can offer temporary relief. But if you have severe reactions, you should see your doctor. He or she may prescribe more powerful medications or recommend regular allergy shots.

June

- Try to use monounsaturated cooking fats like canola and olive oils instead of butter. Butter contains saturated fat, the worst kind for heart health. Monounsaturated fat is best for heart health; it not only reduces LDL cholesterol (the artery clogger) but also increases HDL cholesterol (the artery cleaner).
- Use a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or more every time you go out in the sun. Sun overexposure causes premature aging and increases your risk of skin cancer.
- Did you know that 10 minutes of water exercise is as good as 40 minutes of movement on land? Aquatic exercise is a great workout that doesn't stress your bones or joints, so it's ideal for people with arthritis, osteoporosis, or mobility problems. Consider taking a water aerobics class at your local YMCA or pool. It's a refreshing way to get in shape!

Herbal Medicines Are They Right For You?

By Lynn Hallarman, M.D.



These days, more and more people seem to be heading to the health food store instead of the pharmacy for remedies. The draw? Herbal medicines have wide appeal because they are “natural.” But are they effective ... or safe? Read this article

for answers to important questions about herbal remedies.

What are herbal medicines?

Herbal medicines come from plants. They have been used for healing since ancient times. Herbal medicines can be powerful. In fact,

many prescription drugs are made from plants!

Are herbal medicines safe?

★ Not always; just because herbal products come from plants does not mean they are safe. Plants can be poisonous too!

es: r You?

- ★ Because they are labeled as “food supplements,” herbal medicines are not tested by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for safety, unlike regular prescription drugs.
- ★ Companies that make herbal products do not have to prove that their product is safe or even that it works.
- ★ Herbal medicines may not be pure. They can have extra ingredients that may make you sick or that you may be allergic to.
- ★ There are no U.S. government standards regulating the amount of an herbal substance in a product. You will never be sure of how powerful the herbal medicine you are taking is.

What if I have medical problems and take prescription drugs?

Many herbal medicines may not be safe to take if you have certain medical problems, such as:

- heart conditions
- diabetes
- thyroid disease
- high blood pressure
- stroke
- glaucoma

Some herbal medicines can also be very dangerous if mixed with certain prescription drugs.

**ALTHOUGH THEY
MAY BE NATURAL, HERBAL
MEDICINES ARE NOT
NECESSARILY SAFE.**

If you are already using an herbal product or thinking about taking one...

- ★ Be smart: Let your VA health care provider know if you are taking an herbal product. Check with your health care provider before starting any herbal product. This is especially important if you have a chronic illness, are elderly, or are taking prescription drugs.
- ★ Beware of companies that make claims or use terms such as “purifies the body,” “makes glands strong,” or “cures cancer.”
- ★ Avoid products from unclear sources; they are more likely to be dangerous. Instead, look for herbal products made by nation-

ally known food or drug manufacturers—they are more likely to have strict manufacturing standards in place.

- ★ Look for herbal products with the **U.S.P. label**. This means the company follows standards set by the *U.S. Pharmacopoeia*, the official organization for drug standards and information.
- ★ Read the label! Avoid products with extra ingredients such as caffeine or alcohol. Look for warning labels.
- ★ Never take herbal products if you could be pregnant or are nursing a baby.
Talk with your VA health care provider and make sure it is safe for you to take an herbal medicine. ★

Quick Health Quiz



What's your fitness IQ?

- 1 Which are the three components of fitness?
 - a) cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength, and flexibility
 - b) agility, balance, and motion
 - c) reaction time, speed, and strength
- 2 What is the minimum activity goal for all people?
 - a) to engage in high-intensity activity for 60 minutes three times a week
 - b) to lift weights in a gym 45 minutes a day
 - c) to accumulate at least 30 minutes a day of moderate-intensity physical activity
- 3 Which of the following strategies will help you keep your fitness commitment?
 - a) Vary your activities so you don't get bored.
 - b) Work physical activity into your ordinary routine.
 - c) Track your progress and reward yourself periodically.
 - d) All of the above.
- 4 How can you help make exercise pain free?
 - a) Warm up before and cool down after your activity.
 - b) Apply ice packs to stiff joints before working out.
 - c) Take a pain reliever before and after exercising.
- 5 Which of the following is not a benefit of regular physical activity?
 - a) reduced risk of heart disease and improved cholesterol levels
 - b) enhanced weight control
 - c) protection against some forms of cancer
 - d) better vision and hearing

1. a; 2. c; 3. d; 4. a; 5. d

HEALTH Q&A



Q Is it true that people with dry skin are more prone to wrinkles?

A **Dry skin** can make wrinkles seem more prominent, but dryness does not cause wrinkles. About 80 percent to 90 percent of wrinkling results from ultraviolet rays from the sun or a tanning booth. Gravity, scowling, smiling, smoking, worrying, and sleep lines account for the other 10 percent to 20 percent of wrinkles.

Q There are so many new creams on the market made with collagen, elastin, and vitamins. Can they really rebuild your skin?

A **Yes.** Although skin is made of these nutrients, your skin cannot be rebuilt from the outside. Even if it could, these nutrients are too large to penetrate your skin.

Q My skin is flaky in certain areas and I have dandruff. Does this mean I have dry skin?

A **People** sometimes confuse other flaky conditions with normal dryness. For example, excessive moisture in hair follicles can cause scaling, particularly around the nose and eyebrows. If you use moisturizers for two weeks without improvement of your dry skin, see a dermatologist. ★

Keep Your Vision Sharp



While it's perfectly normal for eyesight to grow weaker as we age, pronounced changes in vision—whether sudden or gradual—are cause for concern.

★ **GLAUCOMA** is a disease of the optic nerve, a bundle of about one million delicate fibers that carries images to the brain. It's caused when fluid buildup in the inner eye puts pressure on the optic nerve.

There are two different kinds of glaucoma: Chronic (open-angle) glaucoma, the most common form, comes on gradually and painlessly. Acute (closed-angle) glaucoma strikes suddenly and severely.

What are the symptoms?

Chronic glaucoma causes gradual narrowing of vision, while acute glaucoma triggers eye pain, rainbow halos around lights, and nausea.

What are the risk factors? Age, nearsightedness, African ancestry, a family history of glaucoma, past eye injuries, and a history of severe anemia or shock are risk factors.

How is it treated? Although eye-drops and oral medication, the standard therapy, reduce pressure on the optic nerve, they cause painful side effects. However, a drug called latanoprost can drain fluid buildup with less pain.

Can surgery help? Yes. In fact, it's highly recommended for acute glaucoma. Using a laser, the surgeon either enlarges the drain or creates a hole in the iris to improve the flow of fluid.



ONE IN THREE AMERICANS OVER 65 HAS ONE OF THESE VISION PROBLEMS.

★ **CATARACTS** are the gradual clouding of the eyes' lenses. The clouding tends to progress so slowly that some patients don't realize the extent of their severe vision loss.

What are the symptoms? They include trouble seeing in bright light, double vision in one eye, fading color, and poor night vision.

What are the risk factors? Diabetes, an eye injury, steroid use, long-term exposure to sunlight, and previous eye surgery are culprits.

How are cataracts treated? Sometimes, a new eyeglass prescription may do the trick. Severe cases may require surgery in which the cloudy lens is replaced with a clear plastic lens.

Can cataracts be prevented?

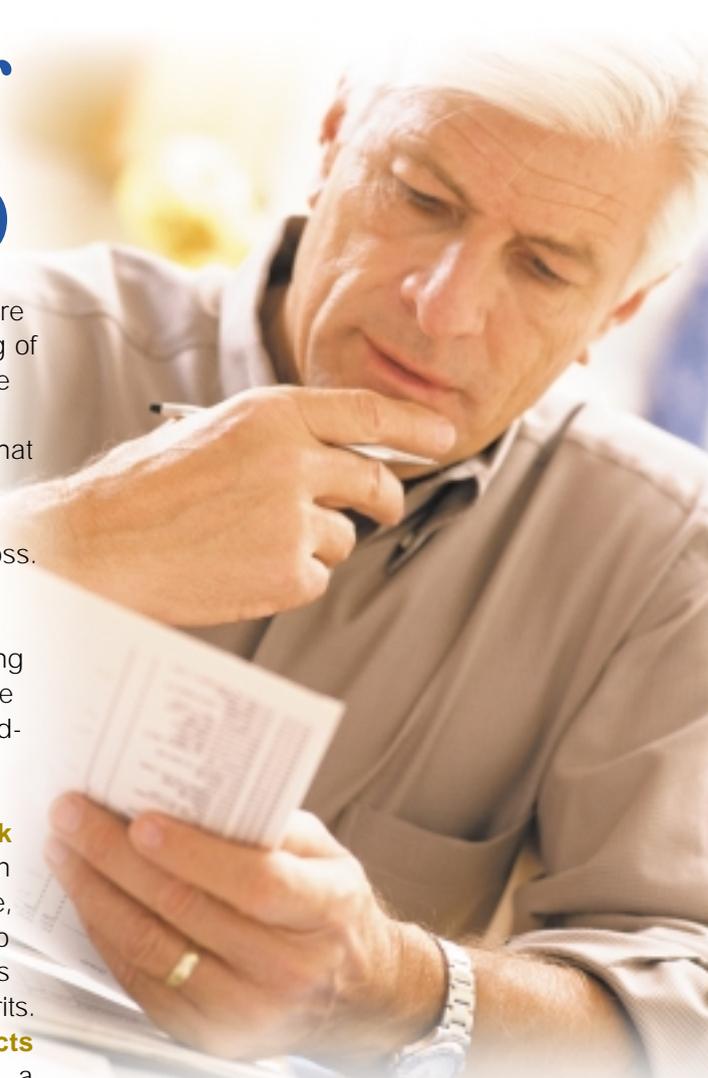
Protecting your eyes with eyeglass lenses that screen out ultraviolet (UV) rays is the main line of defense.

★ **MACULAR DEGENERATION**, the leading cause of severe vision loss in people over 65, is triggered by damage to the macula, the small area of the retina responsible for central vision. In nine out of 10 cases, the aging and thinning of macular tissues cause so-called "dry" macular degeneration. "Wet" degeneration occurs when abnormal blood vessels leak fluid, causing central vision to blur.

What are the symptoms? A dark area in the center of vision and blurry words are among the first signs.

How is it treated? There's no effective treatment for the dry type other than using magnifying devices and other materials that help compensate for vision loss. In its early stages, however, wet macular degeneration can be reversed with laser surgery. Your doctor can do a test called fluorescein angiography to determine if you're at risk.

Can macular degeneration be prevented? Protecting the eyes from UV sun rays may have a hand in prevention. And while some doctors believe that nutritional supplements of zinc or vitamins A, C, and E may slow its progress, that has yet to be proven. ★





VA Capitol Health Care Network Veterans Integrated Service Network 5 (VISN 5)

Important Telephone Numbers

VA Maryland Health Care System

Baltimore VAMC
1-800-463-6295

Fort Howard VAMC
1-800-351-8387

Perry Point VA Medical Center
1-800-949-1003

VAMHCS Telephone Care Line
1-800-865-2441

Automated Prescription Refill and Clinic Appointment System
1-800-463-6295, ext. 7395

Mobile Clinic Number
1-800-351-8387, ext. 2281

Martinsburg VA Medical Center

Martinsburg VAMC
(304) 263-0811

Medical Advice Line
1-800-817-3807 or (304) 262-4855
Monday–Friday, 7:30 a.m.–6 p.m.

Patient Eligibility
(304) 263-0811, ext. 3758/3757
Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–4:30 p.m. or ext. 3050 after 4:30 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill System
(304) 263-0811, ext. 4870 (all hours)

Mobile Clinic Number
1-800-817-3807, ext. 3758/3757
Monday–Friday, 7:30 a.m.–6 p.m., or ext. 3050 after 6 p.m.

Washington DC VA Medical Center

General Information
(202) 745-8000

Medical Advice Line
(202) 745-8247

VETS Information
(202) 745-4046

Mobile Clinic Number
(202) 745-8247

PTSD Clinic Number
(202) 745-8591

Outpatient Clinics

Cambridge, MD (410) 228-6243	Glen Burnie, MD (410) 590-4140	Pocomoke City, MD (410) 957-6718	Stephens City, VA (540) 869-0600	Petersburg, WV (304) 257-1026, ext. 120
Charlotte Hall, MD (301) 884-7102	Hagerstown, MD (301) 665-1462	Alexandria, VA (703) 719-6797	Franklin, WV (304) 358-2355	Washington, DC (202) 745-8685
Cumberland, MD (301) 724-0061	Loch Raven, MD (410) 605-7650	Harrisonburg, VA (540) 442-1773		

Vet Centers

Baltimore, MD (410) 277-3600	Silver Spring, MD (301) 589-1073	Martinsburg, WV (304) 263-6776
Belair, MD (410) 569-0050	Washington, DC (202) 543-8821	Alexandria, VA (703) 360-8633
Cambridge, MD (410) 228-6305, ext. 4123		

Veterans Benefit Administration

1-800-827-1000

Education Information Hotline

1-800-442-4551

Visit us on our website at www.va.gov/visn5

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