



Veterans' Health



The wellness magazine for
VA Capitol Health Care Network Veterans

VA Lowers Copayments for Outpatient Care

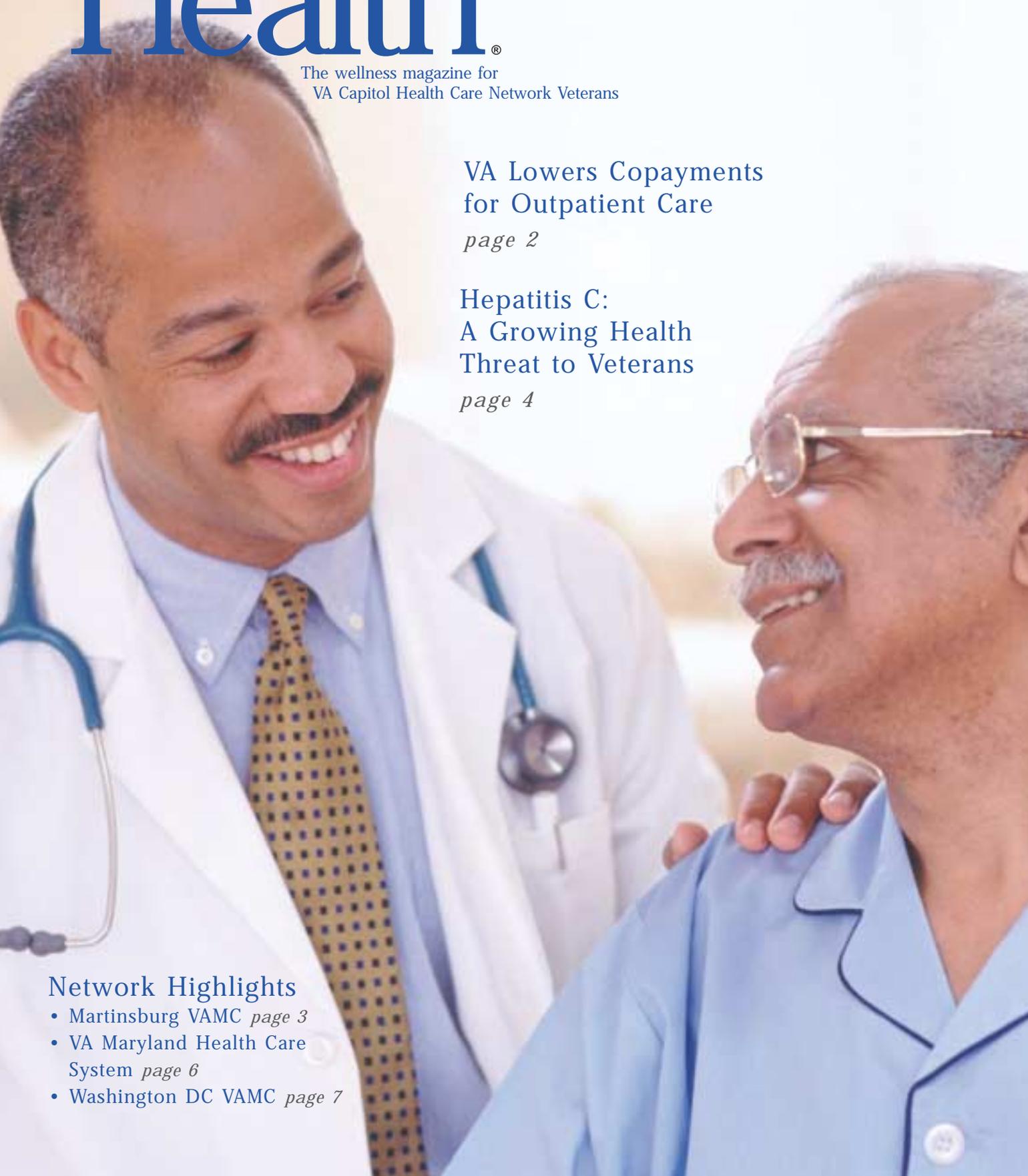
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Valuable Health Care Information at Your Fingertips

The VA Capitol Health Care Network publishes spring, summer, and fall/winter editions of the *Veterans' Health* newsletter to provide a valuable service for our veterans. The newsletter is designed as a wellness magazine to supply our patients with preventive health care information.



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

The articles offer useful health information that may be relevant to you or a loved one. They often identify signs and symptoms of specific illnesses to help you detect various health problems. Diagnostic tests, different treatment programs, and medications are often discussed. The articles also include information about the health care programs offered at our Medical Centers and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, as well as the names and phone numbers of staff who can address your questions or aid you in obtaining care.

Our Medical Center Highlights provide information about local programs or significant events that occur at each of our health care facilities. The *Veterans' Health* newsletter also conveys changes in VA benefits or services, changes in the law, and other issues that affect our veterans. We strive to provide our health care services in a manner that consistently exceeds the expectations of those we have the privilege to serve. We hope you find this and future editions of our *Veterans' Health* newsletter informative and enjoyable.

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,
VA Capitol Health Care Network, VISN 5

VA Lowers Copayments for Outpatient Care

Veterans who currently make copayments for outpatient health care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will have lower bills, and in some cases, no bills at all, under rules that became effective in February 2002.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony J. Principi, lowered the \$50.80 copayment some veterans paid for outpatient care. This decrease is part of an evaluation of outpatient, medication, and long-term care copayments by VA.

The new regulation sets up a three-tier copayment system for outpatient care. The first tier will be for preventive care visits and will cost veterans nothing. This care includes flu shots, laboratory tests, certain radiology services, hepatitis C screenings, and numerous other preventive services. Primary care outpatient visits comprise the second tier and will require a copayment of \$15. The last tier includes specialty outpatient care, like outpatient surgery, audiology, and optometry, and will cost \$50.

Another VA regulation will increase the copayment some veterans make for outpatient medications from \$2 to \$7 for each 30-day supply, with a maximum annual out-of-pocket payment of \$840 for veterans in certain enrollment priorities.

The copayments do not apply for the treatment of medical problems that are officially recognized as "service connected." For non-service-connected conditions, the outpatient copayments apply primarily to veterans enrolled in Priority Group 7.

"This is great news for veterans," said Principi. "It eliminates barriers for veterans to get the preventive care they need and will lower the cost of health care for many. Although VA recently announced increases in medication copayments, the decrease in outpatient copayments often will offset the pharmacy increases."

For more information about the medication copayment, contact your local VA Revenue Coordinator or Health Benefits Advisor, or call **1-877-222-VETS**.



Martinsburg VA Medical Center

H I G H L I G H T S

CARF Inspection

Veterans Industry Compensated Work Therapy Program, which is part of the Mental Health Service Line at Martinsburg VAMC, was surveyed this past October by CARE, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities. The survey results were exceptional. The program was noted for its exemplary treatment of veterans, individual development plans, and Executive Board. No deficiencies were cited, and the program received a three-year accreditation.

CAP Inspection

Laboratory Service at Martinsburg VAMC, which is part of the Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Service Line, received a full two-year accreditation from the College of American Pathologists (CAP) in September. The survey yielded exceptional results and found no deficiencies in service.

New Laboratory Chief

Martinsburg is pleased to announce the arrival of Dr. Vijayaleela G. Victor as Chief of Laboratory Service and Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Service Line Manager, effective December 2, 2001. Dr. Victor comes to Martinsburg from the Buffalo, N.Y., VA Medical Center.

Palliative Care

The Martinsburg Palliative Care Program is part of the

Nursing Home Care Unit A and VISN Geriatric/Long-Term Care Service Line. Jack Tennant, R.N., B.S.N., is the nurse manager and program coordinator. While different from a hospice unit since no home visits are provided, the goal is the same: to alleviate suffering of terminally ill patients. The interdisciplinary team of nurses, physicians, dietitians, recreation therapists, social workers, and chaplains is dedicated to providing palliative patients comfort through symptoms management. They treat the whole person, addressing physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs.

The patient is the most important member of the care team. Patients' family members are very important, too, and are welcomed to team meetings. Visiting hours are unlimited as long as it is appropriate for the patient.

Dedicated, caring employees and volunteers staff the 10-bed Palliative Care Unit and provide quality end-of-life care. Questions can be referred to Jack Tennant at **(304) 263-0811, ext. 4619**, or Denise O'Dell, Clinical Service Coordinator, Geriatric/LTC Service Line, at **ext. 4625**.

Wound Ostomy Clinic

The Martinsburg VA Medical Center is extremely pleased with the specialized services of the Wound Ostomy Clinic and the care provided by enterostomal therapy (ET) nurse Aggie Llewellyn, R.N., M.S.N., C.E.T.N.

ET nurses specialize in the care of patients with selected disorders of the gastrointestinal, genitourinary, and integumentary systems. Wound care services include topical treatment modalities and patient education for chronic ulcer management. The clinic seeks to enhance patient and family education, decrease the length of hospital stays and hospital costs, accelerate healing, and improve patient satisfaction.

Ms. Llewellyn's clinic operations have been recognized for the success rate and treatment of heel pressure ulcers and improved patient satisfaction. Ms. Llewellyn also coordinates the hospital's Skin Integrity Team that provides the latest in pressure ulcer prevention and management. The Skin Integrity Team has observed a 32 percent decrease in the number of hospital-acquired pressure ulcers over the past five years.

The Wound Ostomy Clinic at Martinsburg is located on Ward 4A. Referrals are accepted from the patient's primary care provider, Podiatry or Surgical Services, Nursing Service, the Diabetic Food Clinic, hospitalists, and dietitians. Questions can be referred to Aggie Llewellyn, Clinical Specialist for Ostomy Wound Care at **(304) 263-0811, ext. 3591**.

The ostomy wound nurse at Washington DC is Linda Pagino, **(202) 745-8495**, and at Baltimore, Md., is Cathy Suk, **(410) 605-7000, ext. 6105**. ★

For VA benefits information and assistance, dial toll free **1-800-827-1000**. Public service hours: **8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday**. After-hours service: Leave message for a mailing or return call.



Hepatitis

A Growing Health Threat to

by Beverly Johnson, R.N.C., M.S.
Hepatitis C Coordinator,
Martinsburg VA Medical Center



Perhaps you know about hepatitis C, a chronic viral infection of the liver that's now one of America's biggest health problems. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention estimate that 4 million people in the U.S. are infected with hepatitis C and more than 30,000 new infections occur every year. Unfortunately, in a small percentage of cases, the infection can cause death.

VA is very concerned about this growing threat because veterans seem to have a higher rate of hepatitis C infection than other Americans. Right now, about 80,000 veterans are known to be infected. In response, VA has developed a program designed to help our patients get screening, testing, and, if needed, treatment for the virus.

Today, VA is the largest provider of hepatitis C care in the country. In the past two years, more than 2 million veterans have been screened and tested for hepatitis C.

VA Opens 4 Hepatitis C Centers

VA has funded four new Hepatitis C Field-based Resource Centers to evaluate and improve hepatitis C screening, testing, clinical care, and patient and staff education. They're located at the Minneapolis, San Francisco, West Haven, and Seattle/Portland VA Medical Centers.



C:

Veterans

The Silent Epidemic

The symptoms of “hep C” infection are usually very mild. In fact, you may not have any symptoms at all, which means it’s possible to have it for many years without knowing it. That is why it is sometimes called “the silent epidemic.” Symptoms may include a flu-like feeling, nausea, vague achiness, slight fever, fatigue, headaches, or abdominal pain. Symptoms often fade away, then return.

Although hepatitis C might not make you feel sick, it is still a very serious illness. Over time, it can contribute to other problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and liver failure. Finally, because it stays in your liver and gets into your bloodstream, you can give hepatitis C to someone else through contact with contaminated blood. You can’t give hepatitis C to another person through casual contact; hugging; sneezing; coughing; or sharing food, water, eating utensils, or drinking glasses.

A Blood Test Can Tell

A simple blood test can tell if you have hepatitis C. A sample of your blood is sent to the lab to look for the virus itself or for antibodies that are fighting it. The test is voluntary, and you can find out the results in about two weeks.

Results are confidential and will be kept in your medical record. If you decide not to be tested, it will not affect your access to VA health care.

If You Have Hepatitis C Infection

If you have hepatitis C infection, here are some important things you can do to keep your liver healthy:

- Don’t drink alcohol.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
- Check with your primary care provider before taking any over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or herbs. They might cause even more damage to your liver.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and avoid high-fat or junk foods.
- Exercise regularly.
- Pace your activities to avoid fatigue.

Remember: Treatment for hepatitis C is available from VA. Talk with your primary care provider about having more testing and a liver biopsy to see if your liver has been damaged.

For more information on hepatitis C, visit VA’s website at www.va.gov/hepatitisc or the patient library at your local VA Medical Center. ★

Know Your Risk Factors

Talk with your primary care provider if you want to be tested for hepatitis C. You’re at risk for the infection if you:

- are a Vietnam-era veteran
- had a blood transfusion before 1992
- were exposed to another person’s blood on your skin or mucous membranes
- were on hemodialysis
- have unexplained liver disease
- have abnormal ALT levels
- have tattoos or have had repeated body piercing
- have had multiple sexual partners
- have ever injected drugs, snorted cocaine, or drunk alcohol excessively



Striking Back at Fear

VA Maryland Health Care System Launches PTSD Counter-Offensive

Since September's terrorist attacks, many Americans have found themselves caught in the grip of an even more elusive enemy—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A psychiatric disorder that will affect an estimated 7.8 percent of all Americans at some point in their lives, PTSD occurs as the result of a traumatic, life-threatening event that one has either experienced or witnessed. Serious accidents, violent assaults, natural disasters, and combat experience can all lead to debilitating PTSD symptoms. These can run the gamut from such *short-term effects* as intrusive memories, nightmares, and physiological reactions to *avoidance symptoms* such as detached feelings and amnesia and *hyperarousal symptoms* such as sleep disorders, sudden rage, and lack of concentration.

"The triggering traumatic event must be unnaturally distressing and outside of the range of normal human experience," notes Dr. Will Busse, Acting Coordinator of the Trauma Recovery Program for the VA Maryland Health Care System. "In this case, the event will have a profound psychological impact on you, leaving you with an overwhelming reaction of fear and helplessness."

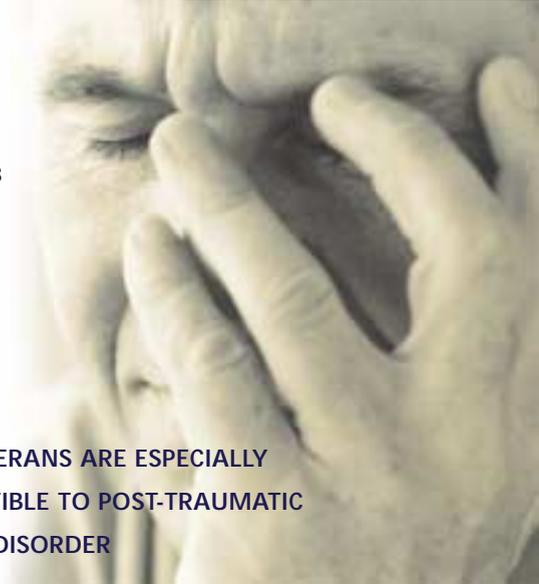
In his current clinical role, Dr. Busse treats a patient population more susceptible to PTSD than most—veterans, especially those with combat experience. Current studies suggest that about 30 per-

cent of men and women who have served in war zones encounter PTSD, with an additional 20 percent to 25 percent having partial symptoms. In this regard, the events of 9/11 have had a heightened impact on many veterans.

Outreach after September 11

Soon after the September attacks, the VA Maryland Health Care System initiated a systemwide outreach to veterans while training staff to better understand the implications of this event on veterans already suffering from PTSD, whether diagnosed or not. "September 11 has definitely caused a recurrence or an increase in symptoms for those veterans who have current or dormant PTSD," says Dr. Busse. "Repeated exposure to the horrible images on television can stir up old combat images along with feelings of anger and total helplessness. Some veterans may even experience actual flashback episodes where they relive their own traumatic experiences in combat."

As a leader in the treatment of PTSD and other war stress syndromes, the VA Maryland Health Care System offers specific programs to treat this psychologically crippling disorder. In particular, the Trauma Recovery Program, which operates under the Mental Health Clinic, provides both outpatient and inpatient programs.



**VETERANS ARE ESPECIALLY
SUSCEPTIBLE TO POST-TRAUMATIC
STRESS DISORDER**

The outpatient program includes therapy and counseling for individuals, couples, and families. In addition, patients can participate in psycho-education groups to learn how to better manage PTSD symptoms. Other program services include a support group for spouses, medications assessment, and process groups for problem sharing.

The Trauma Recovery Program's inpatient option admits patients into a six-week stay of diagnostic evaluation, stabilization, and treatment, served by a core staff of psychiatrists, social workers, and residents. "It's a more intensive treatment plan than is available through weekly outpatient visits," says Dr. Busse.

Veterans who need assistance in coping with PTSD should contact the VA Maryland Health Care System at **1-800-463-6295, ext. 7360.** ★



Study at Medical Center To Find SMART Way To Fight AIDS

A major long-term study comparing two HIV treatment strategies is now under way at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. SMART, or Strategies for Management of Anti-Retroviral Therapies, opened January 2 and will eventually enroll 6,000 people in the United States and Australia. Study participants will be monitored for up to nine years. This is believed to be the largest HIV/AIDS clinical trial undertaken in the U.S.

In this study, HIV-positive patients and their doctors will take one of two approaches when treating the disease. Half of the patients will take anti-retroviral drugs continually to suppress levels of HIV in the blood. The other half will delay drug therapy until CD4+ cells reach a standardized level and continue therapy only when levels are low. These treatment arms have been designed because it is known that anti-retroviral medications can be extremely effective; however, anti-retroviral medications may also cause serious side effects. Treatment interruptions may be able to provide effective viral suppression while limiting exposure to toxicities. Safety parameters have been set based on previous studies.

“We are moving in a new direction in recognition that HIV/AIDS is now treated as a chronic illness similar to diabetes and high blood pressure,” according to Dr. Fred Gordin, Chief of Infectious Disease at the VA Medical Center and principal investigator for the study. “Patients can live for many years with this disease. The study will enable us to gather information about the effectiveness of the treatments, their impacts on quality of life, and the cost of health care.”

The Washington DC VA Medical Center is one of the largest providers of care to HIV/AIDS patients in the metropolitan area. More than 700 patients are currently being treated. The Medical Center has an extensive HIV/AIDS research program. It has partnered with the National Institutes of Health in HIV/AIDS studies in areas including tuberculosis, nutrition, comparative effectiveness of drugs, drug resistance, and the use

of interleukin-2.

The criteria for participation in HIV/AIDS studies at the VA Medical Center are enrollment at the Medical Center, meeting medical eligibility requirements, providing informed consent, and approval of the patient’s physician. HIV/AIDS patients who are not enrolled in the VA health care system may be eligible to participate in the study through other participating physicians in the community. ★



Red and Green Clinics Open

The Washington DC VA Medical Center’s Red and Green Primary Care Clinics have moved to their new location on the first floor. The clinics are located down the hall from the atrium, at the previous location of the old cafeteria. The bright, spacious new clinics improve patient access to primary care.



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 VAMC
1-800-949-1003

VAMHCS Medical Advice 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

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)

Outreach Coordinator
(304) 263-0811, ext. 4013

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	Loch Raven, MD (410) 605-7650	Harrisonburg, VA (540) 442-1773	Petersburg, WV (304) 257-1026, ext. 120
Charlotte Hall, MD (301) 884-7102	Greenbelt, MD (301) 345-2463	Pocomoke City, MD (410) 957-6718	Stephens City, VA (540) 869-0600	Washington, DC (202) 745-8685
Cumberland, MD (301) 724-0061	Hagerstown, MD (301) 665-1462	Alexandria, VA (703) 719-6797	Franklin, WV (304) 358-2355	

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

Veterans' Health
Department of Veterans Affairs
849 International Drive
Suite 275
Linthicum, MD 21090

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