Veterans' Health Today

WINTER 2010

Fight the Flu Before it Attacks You

Your VA Care, Your Way

Managing Pain without the Pills

VA DESERT PACIFIC HEALTHCARE NETWORK

Department of Veterans Affairs

Fight the Flu BEFORE It Attacks You

The VA is always changing and adapting to meet the health care needs of its Veterans, both young and old. This year, the H1N1 flu is of particular concern for all ages of Veterans.

Dr. David Webb, Chief of Environmental Medicine at VA Long Beach, CA, says H1N1 is an influenza virus different from seasonal flu. "Most people have not been exposed to a similar strain, so they don't have any immunity," says Dr. Webb. "There are a number of younger people, adolescents, and people in their twenties developing very serious diseases requiring intensive care." This is different from seasonal flu where usually the elderly have the most complications. Dr. Webb points out that although the majority of people with complications have prior health problems (such as heart or lung disease), many are becoming very ill without any underlying risk factors.

With H1N1, pregnant women and young children are more likely to have complications. "Pregnant women have always had more complications from flu," notes Dr. Webb. In the past, this might not have had much of an effect on VA health care. "But this is not your father's VA," says Dr. Webb. "We actually have 30 pregnant Veterans at the Long Beach VA center that we're currently providing care for, so pregnant women are a high priority for vaccination."

The VA also has many patients with young children. Infants less than six months old are at risk and can't get the vaccine, so those with infants are a priority for vaccination. According to Dr. Webb, this is also new at VA. "Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have children, we also have pregnant Veterans, wives of Veterans, and many families with young babies at home," he says.

To keep yourself and your family well, handwashing is very important. Dr. Webb stresses that you should *never* cough into your hand. "That's the biggest mistake people make," he says. "When you cough or sneeze you should do it into a tissue and then throw it away." Dr. Webb also recommends coughing into your sleeve, using alcohol-based hand sanitizer after coughing or sneezing, and avoiding touching your eyes, nose, and mouth (because that's how germs get into your body). Also, stay home when you're sick and get as much rest as possible. It's also a good idea to get vaccinated for the both the seasonal and H1N1 flu. "We encourage anyone except those allergic to eggs [the vaccine is made in eggs] to get vaccinated when supplies are plentiful—whether, old, young, or healthy," says Dr. Webb. He also points out that vaccination is free for VA patients, although in some cases there may be a small co-payment for medical care.

Along with good handwashing, Dr. Webb advises Veterans to be prepared. "Don't wait until you're sick, have a fever, and are aching all over to go to the drugstore," he says. "Have some over-the-counter medicines at home to help relieve fever and cough. Plus, talk with your physician now and ask what you should do if you get the flu. For example, some can't take ibuprofen because of kidney or stomach problems, and people with severe liver disease have to watch how much Tylenol they take."

So when should you get medical care? If you have health problems, seek treatment early to get medicine called Tamiflu, which works best when it's started within in a day or two after the onset of flu. "Most people who are healthy don't need Tamiflu," says Dr. Webb. "But, if you develop any trouble breathing or shortness of breath it could be a sign that the virus is getting into the lower respiratory tract, and you should come in immediately." Other reasons to go to the doctor include chest pains, sudden dizziness, confusion, and severe vomiting.

"If you have a mild illness and you're a healthy person, then you can probably treat yourself at home," says Dr. Webb. The VA provides places you can get helpful advice. "We offer a 24/7 toll free number patients can call to get advice from nurses," says Dr. Webb. "The VA also has a website you can log on to and answer questions about your symptoms. This can give you advice on self-treatment or when to seek care at a VA medical center."

Help take care of yourself by staying informed. A combination of caution, common sense, hygiene, and vaccination are your best *shot* at fighting the flu!

H1N1 FLU SELF ASSESSMENT

How do you know if you might have the flu? How do you know when it might be best to stay home, call the nurse advice line or your health care provider? Take VA's easy and useful H1N1 self assessment online at **www.publichealth.va.gov/h1n1flu**. You can also download a flu self-assessment flowchart to help determine if you have the flu and what care you should get.

VA ANSWERS THE CALL FOR HEALTH CARE ADVICE

VA health care access and advice is just a phone call away, 24 hours a day:

VA TeleCare

1-877-252-4866

Call toll-free to speak with a nurse. Completely free, confidential answers to your health care questions 24 hours a day.

Your VA Care, *Your* Way

Patient-centered care is an improved way of meeting your unique health care needs. It means caring for *you*, rather than focusing just on your medical condition. The VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network is implementing a new patient-centered model of care in all five network facilities.

Debby Lasker, Network Patient-Centered Care Coordinator, says this model "takes your experience as a patient and humanizes, personalizes, and demystifies it."

There are many ways this model can improve *your* VA health care experience. The most important is human interaction. Every staff member is a caregiver, treating you with courtesy and kindness.

"A concierge desk is new to some of our facilities," says Lasker. "When a Veteran or family member visits, they are greeted and helped find the information they need." At Loma Linda VA, a "quiet time" program was implemented for inpatient units. Two times a day, patients *and* employees can enjoy a noise- and activity-free environment.

Another aspect is social support—involving family and friends in your care. Some of the new changes VA is working on are unrestricted visiting hours and family overnight stays. Lasker points out that many hospitals have already expanded visiting hours.

It is also important to provide you, the Veteran, information and education when you need treatment. VA has been successful doing this in a variety of ways. One is through on-line patient health education programs such as My Health*e*Vet. "Patient access to their medical records is a project something new we're working on," says Lasker. "Once it's in place, if you want to view your medical records a nurse may walk you through it

PATIENT-CENTERED CARE means looking at health care through Veterans' eyes, making the changes necessary to create a healing environment.

and provide access to your information." Customized information is another new VA project. "Based on your diagnosis, you might receive a pamphlet explaining your condition, why you should be admitted for care, and the treatment. This helps you know what to expect throughout your care," says Lasker.

Building design is another part of patient-centered care. As new VA facilities are planned, such as the medical center under construction in Las Vegas, they are made more home-like. Lasker says, "Every time we remodel, we make changes that are more patient-centered." This means VA is working to change the way facilities look, smell, sound, and feel to create a more healing environment.

The VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network is also making changes to help Veterans feel more at home, like adding kitchenettes to Community Living Center units so families can prepare favorite meals. The Greater Los Angeles VA created a *Stairway to Wellness*. "They painted beautiful murals on each of the stairwell landings to encourage people to take the stairs for exercise," says Lasker. At the San Diego VA, a second-floor rooftop was turned into a healing garden with waterfalls, plants, and meditation areas. Also, nursing stations in the Spinal Cord Injury building at Long Beach VA have been remodeled to be more welcoming.

The food is also changing. "The idea is that there should be healthy food choices available at all times for patients and staff," explains Lasker. She also adds that VA is moving toward service that allows greater food choices and different times to eat. At some locations, there are food kiosks open throughout the day for eggs, soups, sandwiches, or burgers—made the way you like it. Volunteers occasionally bake breads or cookies, so Veterans can savor fresh-baked cookies.

Not all services are available at every location, but each VA facility is doing more to transform the culture and care of its patients. According to Lasker, "This new care model is the right thing to do for our Veterans. Each step we take moves us closer to providing the patient-centered care our Veterans truly deserve."

THE PATIENT CENTERED CARE MODEL adds new elements to health care. Some new elements may include:

- Yoga
- Aromatherapy
- Pet therapy
- Walking clubs
- Meditation rooms
- Gardens
- Massage
- Healing arts

Check with your local VA facility to see which elements they offer or are planning to offer in the future.

Managing Pain WITHOUT the Pills

When in pain, it's only natural to want to make it stop. Pain can affect your daily activities, work, social life, and even your sleep. Quite often, taking medications can restore your good health or at least provide relief. But now, many Veterans are trying non-drug treatments to help manage their pain.

Before you head to the pharmacy or your medicine cabinet, Dr. Sanjog Pangarkar, Director of Inpatient Pain Service at VA West Los Angeles Medical Center, shares some alternative ways to treat pain without the use of prescription or over-the-counter drugs.

According to Dr. Pangarkar, arthritis, muscle spasms, muscle tenderness, tendonitis, poor posture, headaches, and fibromyalgia are some of the ailments Veterans can treat without the use of drugs. Often, non-drug treatments can even help patients with chronic pain or diseases. The following are types of treatments for pain management that don't require medication:

Exercise

"Exercise improves muscle strength, flexibility, endurance, range of motion, and sleep quality," says Dr. Pangarkar. "The stronger the muscle supporting bone and/or joint tissue, the more support the joint has during activities such as walking, running, or activities of daily living." Dr. Pangarkar points out that physical activity produces endorphins, natural pain relieving chemicals that lift your spirits. He also says patients with significant joint pain may prefer aquatic therapy since the pool puts less stress on joints.

Therapy

These therapies involve physical or electrical treatment, such as ultrasound, Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) units, heat, ice, or massage. Ultrasound increases heat at the bone and muscle. This improves flexibility and lessens pain while increasing blood flow. "TENS units use electrical impulses to 'drown out' the pain signal," says Dr. Pangarkar. This can lead to less discomfort and muscle tension around the painful area. Icing is another useful treatment. "Ice can decrease inflammation and reduce discomfort," notes Dr. Pangarkar.

Psychological Interventions

"Patients who feel that they are able to exert some control over their pain have better outcomes," says Dr. Pangarkar. Psychological treatments help patients deal with their emotions and believe that they can get better. Relaxation and meditation techniques allow patients to minimize their stress and negativity. "The mind-body connection is proving to be a more important factor in health maintenance than was previously acknowledged among medical professionals," says Dr. Pangarkar. "We are hoping to strengthen Veterans' awareness of this connection and teach them how to use it to their advantage."

Alternative Treatments

Tai Chi, yoga, acupuncture, and chiropractic care are all alternative treatments that make the most of the mind-body connection. According to Dr. Pangarkar, they also allow for improvements in posture and functional alignment. These therapies may even expand patients' understanding of their body mechanics.

In addition to the many forms of non-drug treatments, "Weight loss and smoking cessation are crucial to maintaining and improving health," says Dr. Pangarkar. Non-drug treatments can be most beneficial to patients with chronic pain from musculoskeletal conditions who are inactive or no longer physically fit, and those motivated to try treatments without medication.

Many types of non-drug pain management therapies are available for Veterans at VA Desert Pacific Healthcare

facilities. These alternative treatments can be used alone or together with traditional medication. Plus, Veterans can try many activities at home to manage their pain. "Practice daily home exercises, relaxation or stress management techniques, take part in fun activities, and utilize local resources such as recreation centers and heated pools," suggests Dr. Pangarkar. Visit the nearest VA facility or talk with your physician to find out more about how you can take charge of your pain—and maybe pass on a prescription!

Find more information about non-drug pain management online at:

My HealtheVet: www.myhealth.va.gov

Pain Treatment Topics: http://pain-topics.org/non_opioid_therapies

The American Chronic Pain Association: www.theacpa.org

The American Pain Foundation: www.painfoundation.org

The Arthritis Foundation: www.arthritis.org

The National Pain Foundation: www.painconnection.org

Are you a Veteran in emotional distress?

If so, you can now chat live with a crisis counselor. Veterans Chat is **24 hours a day, 7 days a week at**

http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans/Default.aspx

If you feel you are in crisis and would rather talk to someone on the phone, call the

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

at

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Press 1 for Veterans

VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network Vet Centers

Antelope Valley Vet Center
38925 Trade Center Drive
Palmdale, CA 93551
661-267-1026

Bakersfield - Coming Soon!

Corona Vet Center
800 Magnolia Ave., Suite 110
Corona, CA 92879-3123
951-734-0525

East Los Angeles Vet Center
5400 E. Olympic Blvd., Suite 150
Commerce, CA 90022-5147
323-728-9966

Henderson Vet Center
871 Coronado Center Drive, #200
Henderson, NV 89052
702-952-2885

High Desert Vet Center
15095 Amargosa Rd., Suite 107
Victorville, CA 92394
760-955-9703

Las Vegas Vet Center
1919 S. Jones Blvd., Suite A
Las Vegas, NV 89146-1299
702-251-7873

Los Angeles Vet Center
1045 W. Redondo Beach Blvd., Suite 150
Gardena, CA 90247-4129
310-767-1221

Orange County Vet Center
12453 Lewis Street, Suite 101
Garden Grove, CA 92840-4680
714-776-0161

San Bernardino Vet Center
1325 E. Cooley Drive, Suite 101
Colton, CA 92324
909-801-5762

San Diego Vet Center
2790 Truxtun Road, Suite 130
San Diego, CA 92106
858-642-1500

San Marcos Vet Center
1 Civic Center Drive, Suite 140
San Marcos, CA 92069-2934
760-744-6914

South Orange County Vet Center
26431 Crown Valley Parkway
Mission Viejo, CA 92691
949-348-6907

Sepulveda Vet Center
9737 Haskell Avenue
Sepulveda, CA 91343-1618
818-892-9227

Temecula Vet Center
40935 Country Center Drive, Suites A & B
Temecula, CA 92591
951-296-5608

Ventura Vet Center
790 E. Santa Clara, Suite 100
Ventura, CA 93001-2964
805-585-1860

West Los Angeles Vet Center
5730 Uplander Way, Suite 100
Culver City, CA 90230-6615
310-641-0326

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Las Vegas, NV 89191
702-653-2215

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Loma Linda, CA 92357
909-825-7084

VA Long Beach Healthcare System
5901 East 7th Street
Long Beach, CA 90822
562-826-8000

VA San Diego Healthcare System
3350 La Jolla Village Drive
San Diego, CA 92161
858-552-8585

VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System
11301 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90073
310-478-3711

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Anaheim
1801 W. Romneya Drive
3rd Floor, Suite 304
Anaheim, CA 92801
714-780-5400

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547 W. Lancaster Blvd.
Lancaster, CA 93534
661-729-8655

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Bakersfield, CA 93301
661-632-1800

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562-826-8414

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5400 E. Olympic Blvd. #150
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Suite 215
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25292 McIntyre Street
Laguna Hills, CA 92653
949-269-0700

Las Vegas Homeless Veterans
916 West Owens Avenue
Las Vegas, NV 89106
702-636-4077

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Los Angeles, CA 90012
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San Diego, CA 92108
619-400-5000

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Suite 225
Oxnard, CA 93036
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Palm Desert, CA 92211-6100
760-341-5570

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2100 E. Calvada Boulevard
Pahrump, NV 89048
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8599 Haven Ave., Suite 102
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420 W. Las Tunas
San Gabriel, CA 91776
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1288 Morro St., #200
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2740 S. Bristol Street
1st Floor, Suite 110
Santa Ana, CA 92704
714-825-3500

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4440 Calle Real
Santa Barbara, CA 93110
805-683-1491

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1550 East Main Street
Santa Maria, CA 93454
805-354-6000

Sepulveda
16111 Plummer Street
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28125 Bradley Rd., Ste. 130
Sun City, CA 92586
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1840 West Drive
Vista, CA 92083
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