

# Veterans' Health Today

SUMMER 2015

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# Veterans Choice Program Q&A

## What is the Veterans Choice Program?

The Veterans Choice Program is a new temporary program to improve Veterans' access to health care by allowing certain Veterans to elect to receive health care from eligible providers outside of VA. The program was established by section 101 of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (Choice Act).

## Who is eligible for the program?

A Veteran must have been enrolled in VA healthcare on or before August 1, 2014, or be eligible to enroll as a combat Veteran. Additionally, a Veteran must also meet at least one of the following criteria:

- The Veteran is told by his/her local VA medical facility that he/she will need to wait more than 30 days for an appointment from the date clinically determined by his/her physician or, if no such date is provided, the Veteran's preferred date.
- The Veteran's residence is more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA medical facility.
- The Veteran resides in a location, other than Guam, American Samoa, or the Republic of the Philippines, that is 40 miles or less from a VA medical facility and the Veteran needs to travel by air, boat, or ferry to reach that VA medical facility.
- The Veteran resides in a location (other than Guam, American Samoa, or the Republic of the Philippines) that is 40 miles or less from a VA medical facility and faces an unusual or excessive burden in traveling to a VA medical facility based on the presence of a body of water (including moving water and still water) or a geologic formation that cannot be crossed by road.
- The Veteran resides in a State or a United States Territory without a full-service VA medical facility that provides hospital care, emergency services, and surgical care having a surgical complexity of standard, and resides more than 20 miles from such a VA facility. NOTE: This criterion applies to Veterans residing in Alaska, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana



Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Also, some Veterans in New Hampshire reside within 20 miles of White River Junction VAMC.

## How do Veterans get care authorized and make an appointment?

Veterans must call the Choice Program Call Center at 866-606-8198 to verify eligibility and set up an appointment.

## What is the Veterans Choice Card?

VA mailed all enrolled Veterans a Veterans Choice Card and information about the Choice Program. The Choice Card doesn't replace the identification card Veterans already use to access other VA benefits. If a Veteran is satisfied and wishes to continue with his/her current VA care, there is nothing they need to do at this time. Veterans should save their Choice Cards in case they would like to use the Program in the future. If a Veteran can't find his/her Choice Card, he/she can still call the Choice Program Call Center at 866-606-8198 for information.

## What is the new expanded eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program?

VA expanded eligibility for the Choice Program by changing the method used to measure the distance between a Veteran's residence and the nearest VA medical facility from a straight-line distance to driving distance. Accordingly, Veterans who live more than 40 miles (driving distance) from the nearest facility are now eligible for the Program. Driving distance will also be used to determine eligibility under the other residence criteria, described above.

For more information, visit  
[www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact)

# VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM



VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The Veterans Choice Program provides eligible Veterans the option to receive VA Community Care from approved providers in their communities.

## Am I eligible?



- ✓ Have you been told by your local VA medical facility that they can't schedule your appointment **within 30 days** of the clinically indicated date or if no such date can be determined—your preferred date?
- ✓ Is your current residence **more than 40 miles** from the closest VA medical facility?
- ✓ Do you need to travel by air, boat or ferry to the VA medical facility closest to your home?
- ✓ Do you face an unusual or excessive burden in traveling to a VA medical facility based on the presence of a body of water or a geologic formation that cannot be crossed by road?

If you were enrolled in VA Healthcare on or before Aug 1, 2014 or you are eligible to enroll as a combat Veteran, and answered

# “YES”

to any of the questions, you may be eligible!

## How do I set up an appointment?

Call:  
**866-606-8198**

# 1

Gather your information about any other health insurance coverage you may have (e.g., employer, union-based health plans)



# 2

Call 1-866-606-8198 to make sure you qualify + schedule an appointment. When you call, we will walk you through the following steps:

- You will be asked to enter your ZIP code, and first and last name.
- We will check to make sure you are eligible for this program.
- We will check which of your needs are covered by the VA.
- You will be asked for your address and the name of your preferred VA Community Care. Unfortunately, not all providers will be eligible to participate so if your preferred provider is not available, we will recommend other providers in your area.



# 3

We will then work with you to schedule an appointment.



This hotline is exclusively for making sure you are eligible for the Choice Program and setting up a VA Community Care appointment. If you have questions about other aspects of your VA medical care or want to learn more about enrolling in VA health services, please visit [www.va.gov/health](http://www.va.gov/health).





# STROKE – When Seconds Count

Every 40 seconds, someone in the United States has a stroke. Every four minutes, someone **dies** of a stroke. How can you help save a life—yours or someone else’s—if a stroke occurs?

“The most important thing is DO NOT ignore stroke symptoms,” said Dr. Thomas Hemmen, Professor and Clinical Service Chief, Department of Neurosciences Director for the University of California–San Diego Stroke Program. “Many people ignore weakness, confusion and trouble seeing or walking. They often lie down to take a nap and hope things get better. That’s the **wrong** thing to do.”

## A Call Away

For Veterans in need of help or advice, VA provides help at their fingertips, with a variety of resources just a call away — 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- Nurses are available for health care advice at 1-877-252-4866
- The Veterans Crisis Line aids Veterans in crisis (as well as their families and friends) at 1-800-273-8255, by texting 838255, or online at [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)
- The National Call Center for Homeless Veterans hotline provides homeless or at-risk Veterans access to trained counselors at **1-877-4AID VET (877-424-3838)** or online at [www.va.gov/homeless/nationalcallcenter.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/nationalcallcenter.asp)



Dr. Stephanie Lessig, Neurologist for VA San Diego Health Care System, agreed. “Often people believe there is ‘nothing to be done’ for a stroke, so they delay seeking medical attention. This is not only untrue, but places one at risk of further complications on top of the initial stroke symptoms if it is not evaluated.”

Stroke symptoms such as those Hemmen mentioned are usually sudden. They include some or all of the following:

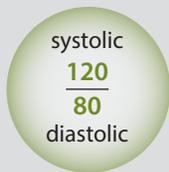
- Numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg—especially on one side of the body
- Confusion; trouble speaking or understanding words
- Trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Difficulty walking, dizziness or loss of balance or coordination
- Severe headache with no known cause

Hemmen said if you or someone else has **ANY** of these symptoms, call 911 immediately. What causes a stroke is a blockage or rupture of a blood vessel that normally carries blood (and oxygen) to your brain. Your brain cells quickly begin to die and lose the ability to control parts of your body.

“We estimate about 1.9 million brain cells die every minute once a stroke is ongoing,” explained Hemmen. “Strokes can be deadly, but quick treatment often reduces the brain damage strokes cause.”

He added first responders can’t provide treatment at home or in the ambulance. Instead, hospital staff

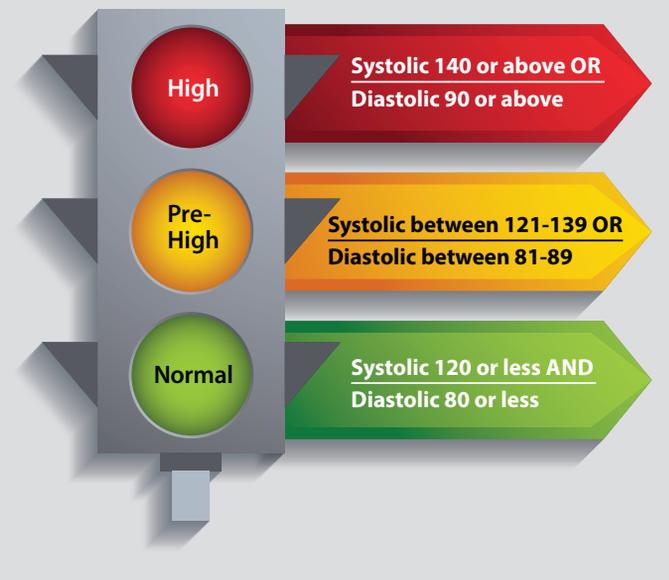
## What do your blood pressure numbers mean?



Blood pressure is measured by two numbers.

Your provider will read this blood pressure as “120 over 80.”

The first (or top) number—**systolic**—is the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart beats. The second (or bottom) number—**diastolic**—is the pressure in your blood vessels between heartbeats.



must perform a computerized tomography (CT) scan to determine the type of stroke you're having, which then dictates the treatment you need. In addition to calling 911 as soon as you notice symptoms, Hemmen said it is critical to note when the stroke symptoms began by reporting when the person suffering the stroke last felt normal (time before the stroke started) because that helps medical staff know which treatments may work.

“Once we know what type of stroke a patient is having, we can begin treatment. We administer a drug for some stroke patients with blocked arteries, but we must do it within 4.5 hours. We can also go in with a catheter similar to the type used for heart attack patients and use a tool to clean out an artery, but we can only perform the procedure within eight hours after a stroke,” he said. “The clock is ticking and brain cells are dying, so it's important to first call 911 and then document when symptoms started or when you last felt OK.”

Hemmen said there is a hereditary component to strokes, so having a loved one who has experienced a stroke may put you at higher risk of having one, too.

You can't control your genetics, of course, but you can—and should—control other risk factors.

“The best thing you can do is monitor your blood pressure and get treatment if you have high blood pressure,” he explained. “A resting blood pressure—taken when you are not physically active and you are not experiencing stress or pain—should be 120/80 or lower.” Additional risk factors include high cholesterol and glucose intolerance, said Lessig, all of which should be regularly monitored by your primary physician.

If you think someone may be having a stroke, remember to act **F.A.S.T.**!

**Face:** Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop, or is it numb?

**Arms:** Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward, or is it weak or numb?

**Speech:** Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase, such as “The sky is blue.” Is the person's speech slurred or hard to understand?

**Time:** If you observe any of these signs, call 911 immediately, even if symptoms go away. Note the time symptoms first appeared, as some treatments are only effective if given within a short time frame.

As with any illness, it's critical to follow-up with your health care team after discharge from the hospital following a stroke. In addition to lifestyle changes and/or rehabilitation, you may need routine testing to monitor potential side effects of medication that thin your blood and prevents future clots from forming.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ...

- Taking care of a stroke survivor requires time, patience, and understanding. The Resources & Education for Stroke Caregivers' Understanding & Empowerment (RESCUE) pages help caregivers “keep their head above water” when caring for a loved one. Learn more at [www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue](http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue).
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains the signs and symptoms of different types of strokes at [www.cdc.gov/stroke/types\\_of\\_stroke.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/stroke/types_of_stroke.htm).
- The American Stroke Association helps you learn about stroke prevention and life after a stroke. See [www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org).

# Patient Safety is Everyone's Business

All hospitalized Veterans share a common goal: *to leave the hospital in much better condition than when they were admitted.* We have numerous programs in place to ensure patient safety happens.

Before surgery, for example, a doctor or surgical team member may use a pen to mark the place on your body where the surgery will happen or may ask you seemingly odd questions, such as your name and what part of the body will be operated on. The team obviously knows the answers to those questions, but cross-check procedures like these help to prevent errors.

Dr. Kandace Woodruff, Patient Safety Officer for VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network, spoke about some of the many other initiatives and explains how Veterans can help.

“We use an approach adopted from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that represents a unified and cohesive patient safety effort. This award winning program is unique to health care. The process is targeted at identifying and eliminating system weaknesses and allows **all** of our staff to be actively engaged in the safety process,” she said. “In the operating room, for example, we reduce surgical errors by allowing every person in the room an opportunity to speak up if they have concerns. This is how we can ensure that we do not leave surgical items (such as surgical instruments or sponges) inside a patient and that we perform the correct procedure every time. At all of our hospitals, we believe patient safety is everyone's business.”

The National Center for Patient Safety (NCPS) was established in 1999 to lead VA's patient safety efforts and to develop and nurture a culture of safety throughout the Veterans Health Administration. The goal of the NCPS is to reduce and prevent inadvertent harm to patients as a result of their care. To learn more, see [www.patientsafety.va.gov](http://www.patientsafety.va.gov).

## Your role in patient safety is to SPEAK UP!

- Please ask questions about your condition, prescriptions, procedures, test results, treatment plan, discharge instructions, or anything else that concerns you.
- Please provide accurate information about changes to your condition, medical history, allergies, etc.

Woodruff said a big aspect of patient safety involves communication with Veterans—telling them what to expect or explaining what is occurring. It is important to empower Veterans, giving them a voice and encouraging them to speak up if they have questions or concerns. “We want our Veterans to actively participate in their own treatment planning by engaging them in the decision-making process,” she said.

“We also look at what we can do as an organization to reduce or eliminate infections,” she added. This includes encouraging friends, family, and health care providers to wash and sanitize their hands before coming into direct contact with Veterans while they receive care.

Our staff want to give Veterans an experience that changes their life in a meaningful and positive way. “We want them to be comfortable and to feel confident that when entering one of our facilities, they can expect to receive the absolute best care,” she concluded. “It is our privilege to provide care for our Veterans and it is our duty to ensure that we do so in a safe and efficient manner.”



# Hepatitis C: Treat or Wait?



Have you heard about a disease called hepatitis C and wondered what it is?

Hepatitis C is a blood infection—a virus that can seriously affect your liver and eventually make you very ill. Several million people in the United States may have it and not even know it.

But there is good news! Many people with hepatitis C do not develop severe liver disease, and new medications have the potential to cure some patients. But not everyone with the disease needs treatment right away. Dr. Jeffrey Sayers, Chief of Pharmacy Service, VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, explained.

“Historically, the drugs for managing hepatitis C took almost a year to work, required injections, and caused serious side effects,” he said. “In 2014, two new drugs were approved that required shorter treatment courses and offered remarkable cure rates. Still, some patients required injections, depending on the genotype (or strain) a person has.” Genotype 1 is the most common and the most serious.

“In 2015,” he continued, “two more new drugs came out that tout approximately 90 percent cure rates, and they’re much easier to take. So the excitement has built over time.”

Dr. Jennifer Kryskalla, Pharmacoeconomist in VA Desert Pacific Network (VISN 22), agreed and said our facilities are seeing excellent results so far. “We have started over 1,200 patients on treatment since 2014. Of those who completed treatment and had the necessary follow-up lab tests, we are seeing 85 percent cure rates, which is really exciting.” She added the newer drugs are not entirely free of side effects, but those that occur are much milder, such as rash, fatigue, or headache.

“Veterans should talk with their primary care provider,” suggested Sayers. “Depending on their hepatitis C test results, some patients can prolong starting treatment because more new drugs or improved versions of the current ones will likely come out in the next few years.”

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Contact your doctor.
- Go to [www.hepatitis.va.gov](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov).
- See the VA booklet titled *Hepatitis C: An Introductory Guide for Patients* at [www.hepatitis.va.gov/pdf/hepatitisC-booklet.pdf](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/pdf/hepatitisC-booklet.pdf).

Kryskalla added that while some Veterans can wait for treatment, others definitely cannot. “Your doctor determines whether the liver is healthy enough to wait. But we are actively looking for patients with cirrhosis, a chronic disease of the liver, because they are in more advanced stages of the disease. They have less time to wait, so we really need to see them right away.”

Depending on the facility where you seek treatment, a pharmacist, physician’s assistant, or nurse practitioner may be managing your treatment and will maintain regular contact with you. “We are investing the time to make sure the treatment continues because the cure rates are so remarkable,” said Sayers, “as long as the patient continues to take the drug.”

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 Facebook: LasVegasVA  
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**VA Loma Linda Healthcare System**  
 11201 Benton Street  
 Loma Linda, CA 92357  
 909-825-7084  
[www.lomalinda.va.gov/](http://www.lomalinda.va.gov/)  
 Facebook: VALomaLinda  
 Twitter: VeteransHealth

**VA Long Beach Healthcare System**  
 5901 East 7th Street  
 Long Beach, CA 90822  
 562-826-8000  
[www.longbeach.va.gov/](http://www.longbeach.va.gov/)  
 Facebook and Twitter: VALongBeach

**VA San Diego Healthcare System**  
 3350 La Jolla Village Drive  
 San Diego, CA 92161  
 858-552-8585  
[www.sandiego.va.gov/](http://www.sandiego.va.gov/)  
 Facebook and Twitter: VASanDiego

**VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System**  
 11301 Wilshire Boulevard  
 Los Angeles, CA 90073  
 310-478-3711  
[www.losangeles.va.gov/](http://www.losangeles.va.gov/)  
 Facebook: LosAngelesVA  
 Twitter: VALosAngeles

▲ **Outpatient Clinics**

**Anaheim**  
 2569 W. Woodland Drive  
 Anaheim, CA 92801  
 714-763-5300

**Antelope Valley**  
 340 East Avenue I, Suite 108  
 Lancaster, CA 93535  
 661-729-8655

**Bakersfield**  
 1801 Westwind Drive  
 Bakersfield, CA 93301  
 661-632-1800

**Symbol Key**  
 ★ VA Medical Centers  
 ▲ Outpatient Clinics

**Blythe Telehealth Clinic**  
 1273 West Hobsonway  
 Blythe, CA 92225  
 760-921-1224

**Cabrillo**  
 2001 River Avenue, Bldg. 28  
 Long Beach, CA 90810  
 562-826-8414

**Chula Vista**  
 835 3rd Avenue, Suite B  
 Chula Vista, CA 91910  
 619-409-1600

**Corona**  
 800 Magnolia Avenue #101  
 Corona, CA 92879  
 951-817-8820

**East Los Angeles**  
 5400 E. Olympic Blvd. #150  
 City of Commerce, CA 90022  
 323-725-7557

**Escondido**  
 815 East Pennsylvania Ave.  
 Escondido, CA 92025  
 760-466-7020

**Gardena**  
 1251 Redondo Beach Blvd.  
 3rd Floor  
 Gardena, CA 90247  
 310-851-4705

**Imperial Valley**  
 1600 South Imperial Drive  
 El Centro, CA 92243  
 760-352-1506

**Laguna Hills**  
 25292 McIntyre Street  
 Laguna Hills, CA 92653  
 949-269-0700

**Laughlin Rural Outreach Clinic**  
 3650 South Pointe Circle  
 Bldg. D, Suite 200  
 Laughlin, NV 89029  
 702-298-1100

**Las Vegas Northeast**  
 4461 E. Charleston Blvd  
 Las Vegas, NV 89104  
 702-791-9050

**Las Vegas Northwest**  
 3968 N Rancho Drive  
 Las Vegas, NV 89130  
 702-791-9020

**Las Vegas Southeast**  
 1020 S. Boulder Highway  
 Henderson, NV 89015  
 702-791-9030

**Las Vegas Southwest**  
 7235 S. Buffalo Drive  
 Las Vegas, NV 89113  
 702-791-9040

**Los Angeles**  
 351 E. Temple Street  
 Los Angeles, CA 90012  
 213-253-2677

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 8810 Rio San Diego Drive  
 San Diego, CA 92108  
 619-400-5000

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 28078 Baxter Road, Ste. 540  
 Murrieta, CA 92563  
 951-290-6500

**Oceanside**  
 1300 Rancho del Oro Drive  
 Oceanside, CA 92056  
 760-643-2000

**Oxnard**  
 2000 Outlet Center Drive  
 Suite 225  
 Oxnard, CA 93036  
 805-604-6960

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 41-990 Cook St., Building F  
 Suite 1004  
 Palm Desert, CA 92211  
 760-341-5570

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 Pahrump, NV 89048  
 775-727-7535

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 Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91730  
 909-946-5348

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 1288 Morro St., #200  
 San Luis Obispo, CA 93401  
 805-543-1233

**Santa Ana**  
 1506 Brookhollow Drive  
 Suite 100  
 Santa Ana, CA 92705  
 714-434-4600

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

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

**Sepulveda**  
 16111 Plummer Street  
 Sepulveda, CA 91343  
 818-891-7711



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

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

**Sepulveda**  
 16111 Plummer Street  
 Sepulveda, CA 91343  
 818-891-7711

**Sorrento Valley**  
 10455 Sorrento Valley Road  
 San Diego, CA 92121  
 858-657-1980

**Victorville**  
 12138 Industrial Blvd., Ste. 120  
 Victorville, CA 92395  
 760-951-2599

**Whittier/Santa Fe Springs**  
 10210 Orr and Day Road  
 Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670  
 562-466-6080