



VA Outpatient Clinics located in Beaumont, Conroe, Galveston, Lake Jackson, Lufkin, Richmond, and Texas City

Injured Navy Veteran Finds Balance at Rehab Center

HOUSTON - Darion Nelson served as an operational specialist in the Navy from 2002 until 2011. Like more than 24 million Americans who have served in the military, the Houston native risked life and limb to serve and protect his country.

In 2011 while serving in Kuwait, Nelson suffered a severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). As a result of his injuries, he returned stateside to Houston to undergo treatment at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC). Here, he has made steady progress in his recovery through the use of innovative technology in the Rehabilitation Center.

The MEDVAMC recently added an EquiTest System® to its arsenal of rehabilitation equipment. The state-of-the-art apparatus has the look of a colorful phone booth. Inside, there are movable walls, a moveable foot plate, a support harness to prevent the patient from losing balance during testing, and a computer screen to provide visual feedback.

"The machine is great for anybody who has balance or dizziness issues," said

Sheryl Vandeven, a MEDVAMC staff physical therapist. "It can help anyone; from a stroke victim, to a spinal cord injury patient, to a traumatic brain injury survivor like Darion."

This 'computerized posturography' machine measures a patient's responses to movement of the platform, then provides computer-generated assessments of the patient's postural alignment and stability. Health care providers use this information to diagnose and treat such conditions as head injury, chronic dizziness, heightened risk of falling, and vestibular and central nervous system disorders.

After his first session using the NASA-designed rehabilitation machine, Nelson could already see its potential benefits.

"The machine is great at helping me find my weaknesses," said Nelson. "I am confident I will make significant progress within the next month or two."

In fact, the nine-year Navy Veteran has already made significant progress. Just last year, he was in a vegetative state after being involved in a roll-over vehicle
(continued on page 2)



Photo by Quentin Nelson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)

Navy Veteran Darion Nelson prepares for a session on the EquiTest System® with Physical Therapist Sheryl Vandeven. "The machine is great for anybody who has balance or dizziness issues," said Vandeven. "It can help anyone; from a stroke victim, to a spinal cord injury patient, to a traumatic brain injury survivor like Darion."

New High-tech, Telemedicine Devices Lead to Better Health and More Independence



Photo by Quentin Nelson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)

Theodore Pantallion, a Home TeleHealth Program volunteer, (left) shows Navy Veteran Martin Cortines, Jr. how to operate a Health Buddy System.

HOUSTON - Veterans with chronic medical conditions requiring frequent monitoring now have access to a wide variety of convenient, easy-to-use telemedicine devices that send daily health updates from their homes to VA health care providers.

The Home TeleHealth Program at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) provides these high-tech gadgets free of charge to Veterans so important medical information about such acute conditions as diabetes, hypertension, high blood pressure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, and heart failure can be continually monitored.

To participate in the Home TeleHealth Program, Veterans must be assigned to a VA primary care provider, have been evaluated in the last six months, and have a disease severity level requiring more than ten visits per year. For example, an individual who has a diagnosis of hypertension with a blood pressure of at least 160/90 or uncontrolled diabetes with an A1C of at least nine. Patients also need access to cellular, Internet, or Plain Old Telephone

(continued on page 4)



Inside This Issue

Word from the Director	
"New Appointment Scheduling System"	2
2nd Fisher House	2
Depression and Parkinson's	3
Prevent Car Burglaries	3
New Smoking Policy	4
Million Veteran Program	4
Optical Shop Relocates Close to Eye Clinic	5
Nibble on Nuts	5
Support Group Lists	6
Prevent Chronic Diseases with Modest Weight Loss	6
Skin Cancer Awareness	7
2012 Hurricane Season	7
Sign Up Today for MyHealthVet	8
Questions from Veterans	8

Like Us on Facebook and Follow Us on Twitter!

Second Fisher House for Houston VA Gets Green Light

HOUSTON – VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has approved the use of land and resources for a second Fisher House at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC).

Fisher Houses provide a comforting “home away from home” for families of seriously ill Veterans and active duty military personnel receiving specialized, lengthy medical care at VA or military hospitals. The presence of family members plays an important role in recovery; especially when the loved one is in an unfamiliar environment.

The Fisher House Foundation, a not-for-profit organization under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code, has built 56 houses on the grounds of military and VA hospitals. The Foundation annually provides short-term, no cost, convenient, quality housing to more than 12,000 families. Each house features cozy guest suites with private baths, a modern, common kitchen, laundry facilities, a spacious dining room, and an inviting living room with library.

VA provides the land and is responsible for daily operation and maintenance of the homes. However, Fisher Houses are built using donations from local community businesses, foundations, organizations, and

individuals. Those funds are then matched by the Fisher House Foundation.

Since opening in 2005, the length of stay in the current Houston Fisher House has averaged 11 days and the average number of guests has been about 34 per night. Even with 21 suites, the Houston Fisher House has an occupancy rate of more than 98 percent. Turning away as many as 15 families a week, Houston is the busiest Fisher House in the system.

“A second Fisher House in Houston will help accommodate these demands,” said Adam C. Walmus, M.H.A., M.A., F.A.C.H.E., MEDVAMC director. “We want to ensure our Veterans and their families can concentrate on health and healing in a welcoming and calm environment close to the hospital.”

Taking the lead in fundraising for the second Houston Fisher House, Air Force Veteran Richard E. Wainerdi, Ph.D., president and chief executive officer of Texas Medical Center, has again accepted the challenge to work with the community to raise the necessary funds.

“The Fisher House is much more than just a place to stay,” said Fisher House Manager Frank Kelley, a VA employee. “It also serves as a haven for many of the families. Recently, an active



Since opening in 2005, the length of stay in the current Houston Fisher House has averaged 11 days and the average number of guests has been about 34 per night. Turning away as many as 15 families a week, Houston is the busiest Fisher House in the system.

duty airman became severely ill while stationed in another state. We helped coordinate his transfer, and within a couple of days, the young man, his wife, and their two young children were at the DeBakey VA and staying at the Fisher House. Originally from Hawaii, their extended family was far away. Other guests at the Fisher House helped out, provided support, and made the difficult

times more bearable. This scene is repeated here daily and is enormously beneficial for our families.”

“We’re giving families help at a time when they need it the most,” said Dave Coker, president of the Maryland-based Fisher House Foundation. “Health care professionals say families play an important role in recovery, so we want to help them be near their loved ones.” ♦

A Word from the Director . . .

You Asked for a New Appointment Scheduling System

HOUSTON - I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you for the feedback you provided through the Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients (SHEP) and Press Ganey Surveys. I want to tell you about a recent, significant change in Primary Care that is a direct result of your valuable suggestions.

In March, a new appointment scheduling system was piloted in Clinic 1 in Primary Care in Houston. With positive results from that test, the system is now being implemented throughout all Primary Care Clinics. The upshot of this new system is that VA Primary Care Clinics will no longer schedule appointments more than 90 days in advance.

More importantly, Veterans will now receive a letter when it is time to schedule their follow-up appointments. This detailed letter will let you know that it is time to call and make an appointment with your VA primary care provider. You are now able to make your appointment on a date and at a time that *is convenient for you*.

This change to our appointment scheduling system is based solely on feedback we received from you and



*Adam C. Walmus, MA, MHA, FACHE
Medical Center Director*

your fellow Veterans. Two basic complaints we heard were that Veterans did not know when their appointments were and that appointments were made at times convenient for the VA, not the Veteran.

This new appointment scheduling system will be in place in the remaining three Primary Care Clinics in Houston by the end of the summer.

If you have questions or concerns about the new appointment scheduling system, please contact Primary Care Administrative Officer Lindsey Harper at (713) 791-1414, ext. 3652.

The MEDVAMC remains committed to providing you the best health care anywhere. Your opinion does count and we will continue to use your comments to improve the quality of health care and customer service here, at your VA medical Center. *Thank you for your service to our country!* ♦

VA Helps Vet Find Balance

(continued from page 1)

accident. His stepfather recounts the day that his family got the terrible news.

“I was barbecuing for Easter and two Navy people came to the door,” said Marcus Freeman. “I remember his mom answered the door, she actually shut the door in their faces because it was so too much to handle. When she let them in, they explained what happened in Kuwait.”

“They said the tire on the driver’s side blew and because the sand was so soft, the truck tumbled,” said Linda Freeman, Nelson’s mother. “Darion was thrown from the vehicle, landed face-first in the sand, and unconscious, inhaled sand into his lungs.”

The lack of oxygen to Nelson’s brain led to a severe TBI. A TBI happens when something outside the body hits the head with significant force. This could happen when a head hits a windshield during a car accident, a piece of shrapnel enters the brain, or during an explosion of an improvised explosive device.

A recent report by the Rand Center of Military Health Policy Research suggests close to a third of returning service members suffer from some degree of TBI.

Recovery from a TBI can take months, if not years. Once Nelson was

in VA’s care, the staff quickly recognized his injuries and took the necessary steps to help him recover.

“We chose the Houston VA for Darion’s recovery and treatment because of the people, especially Dr. Sneed,” said Linda Freeman. “She is very hands-on and she has a great bedside manner. Our Veterans are fortunate to have her.”

Polytrauma/TBI Medical Director Stephanie Sneed, M.D. actually sees it the other way around. She is thankful for having the opportunity to help Darion and his family.

“Veterans, with the sacrifices they have made for our country, have earned and deserve the best care anywhere,” said

Sneed. “As a physician, I feel privileged to work at the VA and take care of patients like Darion. He tries his best and is open to learning new ideas. In TBI, family support is critical and Darion’s family has been very supportive from the beginning.”

“Darion shows improvement every day,” said Marcus Freeman. “He has improved to the point where he is actually cooking breakfast. I monitor him, but he breaks the eggs and cooks the bacon. I don’t know where he’ll be in his recovery within the next couple of months exactly, but I’m sure he’ll be better thanks to the VA.” ♦ *Quentin Melson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)*

“We chose the Houston VA for Darion’s recovery and treatment because of the people.”

Meds Ease Depression for Parkinson's Patients without Worsening Other Symptoms

HOUSTON - Today's anti-depressant medications can ease depression in Parkinson's patients without worsening other symptoms of the disease, according to a study published online in *Neurology*[®], the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

"Depression is the number-one factor negatively affecting the quality of life for people with Parkinson's disease," said Laura Marsh, M.D., Mental Health Care Line executive at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and a co-investigator in the study. "It causes a great deal of suffering among patients. The great news here is that it's treatable. And when the depression is treated adequately, many of the other symptoms become much more manageable for patients."

The findings are good news for patients with Parkinson's disease, a chronic neurologic disorder best known for causing slow movement, stiffness, balance problems, and other motor difficulties. However, about half of Parkinson's patients also struggle with depression.

"It's very important to note that these patients are not depressed simply because they are dealing with a chronic neurological condition," said Marsh. "Rather, the depression is caused by the underlying disease process, which also causes problems with movement and balance."

Valuable Crime Prevention Tip from the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Police Service

Simple Ways to Prevent Car Burglaries and a Bad Day

HOUSTON - In Texas, a vehicle is burglarized every two and a half minutes. This crime is estimated to cost Texans more than \$200 million a year. Burglary of a motor vehicle is most often a crime of opportunity. If you take away the opportunity, you reduce the chance of being a victim and avoid a bad day.

The best way to keep thieves from breaking into your vehicle is to leave it as if it just rolled out of the factory.

In other words, take or hide visible items such as laptops, GPS systems, cell phones, satellite radios, gym bags, back packs, shopping bags, radar detectors, tools, address books, purses, wallets, mail, checkbooks, and credit cards.

Even if the item has no value, it is not worth having to pay \$500 or more for a smashed window or broken door. Do not trust that window tint will keep your valuables hidden.

If a thief does not see anything, they are less likely to break in and will move along. If you plan to hide items in your trunk, do so prior to parking your vehicle. If a thief sees you place items in your trunk, they will break your window to get to the interior trunk release.

While older medications known as tricyclics help treat depression in such patients, those drugs can have undesirable side effects. This led physicians to try newer antidepressant medications in Parkinson's patients. But recent smaller studies with these medications had mixed results, leaving some physicians to question whether these drugs were actually of any benefit. In addition, there was some concern that they might worsen patient's motor symptoms.

With funding from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), the Study of Antidepressants in Parkinson's Disease included 115 people with Parkinson's disease at 20 sites in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. All the participants had Parkinson's disease and met the criteria for depression.

About one-third of the participants received paroxetine (brand name Paxil), a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors; one-third received venlafaxine extended release (brand name Effexor), a serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor; and one-third received a placebo.

On average, the people receiving paroxetine had a 59 percent improvement and those receiving venlafaxine had a 52 percent improvement in their depression severity scores, according to the Hamilton Rating Scale for

Here are some useful tips:

- ✓ Hide your things. Regardless of their value, items in the open make your vehicle a bigger target.
 - ✓ Take your keys. Do not leave a second set in your vehicle. More than 20 percent of stolen vehicles have keys inside them.
 - ✓ Lock your vehicle and close your windows. Almost half of all vehicles stolen are left unlocked.
 - ✓ Never leave your vehicle running unattended or with children in it. Vehicles are often stolen at convenience stores and gas stations when an owner leaves the vehicle running.
 - ✓ Do not leave the registration receipt or title in your vehicle.
 - ✓ Install an anti-theft device. Use a car alarm, kill switch, or steering wheel and column device. Your insurance company may give you a discount for certain anti-theft devices.
- Finally, be aware of suspicious people. If you see someone pulling vehicle door handles, looking into windows, or bumping into vehicles to check for alarms on VA property, notify the VA Police Service at 713-794-7106.



Photo by Bobbi Gramer, Communications Director

Laura Marsh, M.D., Mental Health Care Line executive at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, holds certifications from the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and has added qualifications in Geriatric Psychiatry. She is a member of the scientific advisory boards for the American Parkinson's Disease Foundation and the National Parkinson's Foundation, and the author of numerous peer-reviewed journal articles, medical publications, and manuscripts.

Depression. People who received the placebo had a 32 percent improvement. Three other depression rating scales showed similar results. The drugs were generally well tolerated and did not lead to any worsening in motor functioning.

Today, people are becoming more knowledgeable that depression is frequently part of the disease, said Marsh, who has witnessed striking improvements in many patients after effective treatment.

"After treatment for depression, patients and their families often see a dramatic difference in how they're feeling, within a few weeks or months. They have more interest in things. They have more energy; they're sleeping better. And generally, there is a great sense of relief and a huge burden has been lifted," said Marsh, who is listed as one of the

best doctors in the nation in the field of psychiatry and is also a professor at the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and in the Department of Neurology at Baylor College of Medicine.

She added that sometimes it can be difficult to spot depression in patients, because some symptoms overlap with other symptoms of Parkinson's. For instance, Parkinson's patients will be less animated, their voice will be less expressive, and many will have sleep difficulties – but they may not be depressed. Careful diagnosis is crucial.

In addition to funding from NINDS, the study was supported by the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Wyeth Pharmaceuticals provided venlafaxine XR and Glaxo-Smith Kline provided paroxetine. ♦



Concerned about Your Blood Pressure?

This research is supported by:







If you join the SPRINT Research Study, you will receive at no cost:

- ✓ Blood Pressure Medication(s)
- ✓ Physical Exams
- ✓ Lab Tests
- ✓ Memory Tests
- ✓ EKGs (Electrocardiograms)

You must be at least 50 years old; have high blood pressure, with systolic (upper) number of at least 130; and have no history of diabetes or stroke.

To learn more, contact Cathy Anderson at 713-794-8912.

TeleHealth

(continued from page 1)

Service (POTS), and have electrical service in their home. Either the patient or the caregiver must possess sufficient cognitive function to use the equipment, interact with their care coordinators, and report the results.

One simple piece of equipment, called a "Health Buddy®," looks like an answering machine. It collects and transmits disease management information including vital signs, symptoms, and behaviors to VA Home TeleHealth Program staff. With this critical data, VA health care providers are able to closely monitor Veterans, make recommendations, and communicate with the patient and the health care team.

The MEDVAMC also uses Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology for visually impaired patients. IVR allows Veterans to speak their responses into a cell or home telephone.

The Viterion TeleHealth Monitor® and Cardiocom's Commander Home Telehealth Monitoring System® are used to measure weight, blood pressure, pulse, blood glucose, and pain levels.

"These new telemedicine devices help Veterans take better care of their health by providing them a more active role in their own well-being," said Home TeleHealth Care Coordinator Ayalanda Williams, R.N., B.S.N., M.H.A. "Veterans in this program enjoy greater peace of mind knowing that the people responsible for their medical care have their latest health information."

Before a telemedicine device is activated, specific questions about the Veteran and his illness are recorded. The patient answers these questions each day. Information such as blood pressure, weight, and blood glucose level are entered into the electronic system allowing the Veteran's care coordinator to anticipate and prevent avoidable problems. Health care providers monitor daily and contact the patient for medication adjustments.

Health care providers have seen a rise in positive outcomes from patients who have used telemedicine devices. In fact, the Home TeleHealth Program was recently recognized as a Prime Care "Best Practice."

"Patients in the Home TeleHealth Program have had significant improvements in diabetic control and a reduction in unscheduled clinic and emergency visits," said Williams. "This device improves treatment and medication compliance by educating and monitoring patients on a daily basis."

Telemedicine technology does not replace routine medical appointments; rather, it enhances primary care.

For more information about the VA Home TeleHealth Program, contact Marcia Crane at 713-791-1414, ext. 4691 or Nicklette Knight at 713-791-1414, ext. 3218. ♦

Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the U.S.

Targeting the Nation's Leading Killer



Photo by Bobbi Gruner, Communications Director

Army Veteran Ray Martin takes the first step in quitting smoking. Research shows most successful quitters use many tools like nicotine replacements, counseling, prescription medications, guide books, or the help of friends and family members. Find what works for you and do not give up. If you smoke and would like to quit, talk to your VA health care team today.

HOUSTON – In an effort to improve the health of Veterans, volunteers, visitors, and staff, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) will severely limit smoking on its campus this year. Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the United States.

"Tobacco smoke is a proven health hazard that affects both smokers and non-smokers," said Adam C. Walmus, M.H.A., M.A., F.A.C.H.E., Medical Center director. "The decision to change our smoking policy reflects the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center's commitment to improve the health of

our Nation's heroes."

Each year, an estimated 443,000 people die prematurely from smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke, and another 8.6 million live with a serious illness caused by smoking. Despite these risks, approximately 46.6 million U.S. adults smoke cigarettes.

Smokeless tobacco, cigars, and pipes also have deadly consequences, including lung, larynx, esophageal, and oral cancers.

The harmful effects of smoking do not end with the smoker. An estimated 88 million nonsmoking Americans are exposed to secondhand smoke. Even brief exposure can be dangerous because nonsmokers inhale many of the same poisons in cigarette smoke as smokers.

Smoking at the MEDVAMC will only be allowed in designated smoking shelters. Veterans, employees, volunteers, and visitors will be ticketed and/or fined for smoking outside of these designated areas.

A study by the Institute of Medicine, requested by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Pentagon, revealed that one in three service members use tobacco, compared with one in five adult Americans. Combat veterans are 50 percent more likely to use tobacco than troops who have not seen combat.

The MEDVAMC offers a wide range of assistance to help reduce nicotine addiction including smoking cessation classes, step-by-step manuals, one-on-one counseling, prescription medications, nicotine replacement products, and other related items. Veterans should talk with their VA health care team today about available options. ♦

Protect Eyes, Prevent Long-Term Damage to Sight

HOUSTON – Taking precautionary measures to protect your eyes in southeast Texas can help prevent long-term damage to eyesight, said a Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center ophthalmologist.

"Ultraviolet light has been linked to the development of macular degeneration, cataracts and other vision-loss problems," said Elizabeth Baze, M.D., deputy executive of the Eye Care Line.

Baze, who is also an assistant professor of Ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine, offered tips to help protect your eyes.

When picking sunglasses, the bigger the better. "The more they wrap around and shield your eyes and the skin around the eyes, the more full protection you have," she said.

Pick sunglasses that provide 99 to 100 percent UV protection. They do not need to be expensive to offer this. Use sunblock around the eyes and wear a broad-brimmed hat.

"Practicing simple measures can ensure healthy fun in the sun," said Baze. ♦

Million Veteran Program: A Partnership with Veterans



Discovery → Innovation → Advancement

MVP IS NOW ENROLLING

What is the Million Veteran Program (MVP)?

MVP is a national, voluntary research program conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Research & Development, that collects genetic and health information to help lead to new ways of preventing and treating illness. MVP will provide a better understanding of how genes affect health and illness, with the goal of improving health care for Veterans.

Who can participate?

Any Veteran enrolled to receive care in the VA healthcare system can participate.

How do I enroll?

If you are interested in participating today, please see below for directions to the MVP clinic located within your center. You can also call the MVP Information Center at the toll-free number below to schedule an appointment.

Participation involves:

1. Filling out surveys through the mail
2. Completing a one-time, approximately 20 minute, study visit to provide a blood sample for genetic analysis at a VA Medical Center
3. Permitting authorized MVP staff to access information in your medical record on an ongoing basis
4. Agreeing to future MVP contact

Our highest priority is protecting your right to privacy. MVP has extensive safeguards in place to keep your personal information secure and confidential.

Your decision to participate in MVP will not affect access to health care or benefits.

Houston MVP Representatives:

Tammy Natividad, Doralene Smith, Emily Boeckman, and Dr. Rayan Al Jurdi
Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Room 6B-310



For information, visit www.research.va.gov/MVP or call toll-free 866-441-6075.

Optical Shop “Korrects” Location and Space Obstacles



Army Veteran Andre' Cunningham chooses a pair of eyeglasses with the help of Optician Linda Gilford at the new Optical Shop at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center.

HOUSTON – Responding to suggestions from patients, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Optical Shop recently moved from the second floor Prosthetics Department to a location adjacent to the renovated Eye Clinic on the first floor near the nursing home entrance and increased the size of the floor plan.

“I like how it is now more accessible and convenient for patients,” said Army Veteran Andre' Cunningham. “It also has more space; the old location was like a matchbox compared to the new location.”

The Optical Shop is manned by five employees including three opticians and two administrative assistants. It provides eyeglass fittings and adjustments, dispenses a variety of VA-selected frames and lenses, performs upgrades for Veterans willing to spend out-of-pocket, and does eyeglass repairs.

“We moved to be closer to the Eye Clinic and prevent Veterans from having to go out of their way to get to us,” said Linda Gilford, an optician with Korrekt Optical, the VA contractor operating the Optical Shop. “We also moved because the old space was just getting too small.”

“The DeBakey VA is committed to providing Veterans the best health care anywhere. We sincerely value their opinions and suggestions,” said Adam C. Walmus, M.H.A., M.A., F.A.C.H.E., MEDVAMC director. “Moving the Optical Shop is just another example of how we continue to use Veteran input to improve the quality of health care and customer service available here, at their VA medical center.”

With only a few days since its relocation, the new Optical Shop is drawing nothing but praise from Veterans and family members. ♦ *Quentin Melson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)*

Nibble on Nuts: Surprising Taste of a Healthy Diet

HOUSTON - Studies have shown that people who eat nuts have a lower risk of heart disease, diabetes, as well as some forms of cancer.

Eating nuts as part of a balanced diet can improve health and may decrease disease risk. Also, nuts may help lower your low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, the “bad” cholesterol. High LDL cholesterol is one of the leading causes of heart disease.

Nuts have healthy fats that also benefit the heart. Nutrients found in nuts are also thought to improve function of the blood vessels by lowering overall

heart disease risk.

Nutrients that nuts provide include potassium, iron, zinc, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, folate, selenium, and vitamin E. They are one of the best plant-based sources of a healthy form of fat than may prevent heart attacks.

Nuts also contain fiber which also may lower bad cholesterol and play a role in preventing diabetes. The high fiber and protein in nuts promotes fullness which may help with weight loss.

The type of nut is not important because almost all have health benefits.



Army Veteran Kenneth Davis picks up a few bags of nuts to eat as a healthy snack. If you want to learn more about eating better and the health benefits of nuts, call 713-791-1414, ext. 4296.

But, some nuts may have more nutrients and heart healthy fats than others.

One of the most studied nuts is walnuts. They contain high amounts of omega-3 fatty acids, a type of healthy fat. Some other nuts that appear to provide health benefits include almonds, macadamia nuts, hazelnuts, pistachios, and pecans. Even peanuts have proven to provide some health benefits.

Although nuts have high nutritional value, they also have a lot of calories; therefore, they should be consumed in moderation. For example, one ounce of macadamia nuts has 203 calories; one ounce of pecans equals 196 calories; one ounce of walnuts, 185 calories; one ounce of almonds which have more magnesium than most nuts, 164 calories; and one ounce of pistachios, 161 calories.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, eating about one handful or about 1.5 ounces of nuts per day may decrease the risk of heart disease. In addition, studies have shown that as little as two ounces of nuts per week can lead to decreased disease risk. Again, the best approach is to receive

the benefits of eating nuts while not adding too many calories to your diet.

Because of their high calorie content when adding nuts to your diet, it is important to cut back on something else. Therefore, nuts may be consumed as a snack instead of chips or cookies.

They can also be eaten at meals in place of high fat foods such as meat, eggs, or dairy products. You can sprinkle nuts into salads, yogurt, cereal, pasta, cooked vegetables, or pancakes. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the benefits of nuts can be nullified if they are covered with chocolate, sugar, or salt.

Nuts are a healthy food because they contain healthy fats, protein, and many vitamins and minerals. They have long shelf life and are not perishable. Nuts are just one part of a healthy lifestyle and the most benefits occur when they are consumed as a part of a balanced diet.

When eating nuts it is very important to monitor serving size and eat them in place of other, less healthy foods. If you have questions, contact a VA Registered Dietitian at (713) 791-1414, ext. 3976, 4296, or 6166. ♦ *Natalie Buchs, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern*

HEART attack

Heart health should be important to everyone regardless of their medical history. However, every year, about 785,000 Americans have their “first heart attack.”

Local physicians are conducting a research study of the investigational use of a medication in its ability to reduce your risk of future heart attacks and other cardiovascular events such as a stroke.

You may qualify to participate if you have had at least one heart attack. Participants may continue their current medications throughout the study. All study-related care and study medication will be provided at no cost.





**To learn more, contact
Cathy Anderson
at 713-794-8912.**



Cutting 500 calories out of your diet every day might be easier than you think.

Modest Weight Loss Can Prevent or Improve Chronic Diseases

HOUSTON - Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight is important for your overall health and can help you prevent and control many diseases and conditions.

If you are overweight or obese, you are at higher risk of developing serious health problems including heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, gallstones, breathing problems, and certain cancers. Maintaining a healthy weight helps you lower your risk for developing these problems, feel better about yourself, and gives you more energy to enjoy life.

Modest weight loss of ten percent through diet and exercise can reduce risk factors for many health problems.

The Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) funded by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases studied the effects of weight loss on diabetes. They found weight loss of five to seven percent of a person's body weight can decrease the risk of getting type 2 diabetes by 58 percent.

This lowered risk of diabetes is because the body uses insulin and processes glucose more efficiently. DPP participants decreased their blood pressure and improved their blood lipid levels. These changes helped prevent heart disease.

DPP members lost weight by eating less fat and consuming fewer calories.

In addition, they participated in 150 minutes of exercise each week.

You do not have to be at your ideal body weight to reduce your risk of developing chronic diseases. Moderate weight loss has been shown to lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugars.

A good goal to begin with is a five percent to ten percent weight loss. For example, if you weigh 200 pounds, a five percent weight loss would be ten pounds.

Losing weight slowly will help you maintain the weight loss over time. To lose one pound of fat in a week, you need to decrease your food and beverage intake by 3,500 calories per week. Although this number seems high, if you divide 3,500 calories by seven that is just 500 calories per day.

Cutting 500 calories out of your diet every day might be easier than you think. For example, two bottles of soda equals 500 calories; one large order of french fries equals 500 calories, and approximately four ounces of potato chips equals 500 calories. You can also check the food label on products to see what adds up to 500 calories. Another option is to increase your exercise routine to burn 500 calories per day.

To summarize, moderate weight loss through diet and exercise can improve or prevent the development of



Veteran Bennett Smith discusses the benefits of moderate weight loss with Dietetic Intern Jennifer Chipman. If you want to learn more about healthy weight loss options, speak with a registered dietitian at 713-791-1414, ext. 4296.

chronic diseases.

For more information on weight loss, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov and

or contact a VA registered dietitian at (713) 791-1414, ext. 3976, 4926, or 6166. ♦ *Jennifer Chipman, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern*

Veterans are never alone . . . Support Groups are Available

Amputee Support Group

Meets 4th Wednesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Facilitators: Stacy Flynn, 713-794-7819 & Rosa Lane-Smith, 713-791-1414, ext. 4034

Breast Cancer Survivors' Support Group

Meets last Tuesday every month, noon, Cancer Center Family Room 4C-365. Facilitators: Magdalena S. Ramirez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5289 & Gail Menchaca, 713-791-1414, ext. 3936

Cancer Support Group

Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 1-2 p.m., Cancer Center Family Room 4C-345. Facilitator: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5273

Depression & Bipolar Support Group for Veterans

Meets every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Homeless Domiciliary, 7329 Fannin Street, Facilitator: Anthony Morris, 713-791-1414, ext. 2323

Liver Transplant Support Group

Meets every Tuesday 3 p.m., Room 5B-166, Facilitator: Juleena Masters, 713-791-1414, ext. 6286

Lung Cancer Support Group

Meets 1st Tuesday every month, 1:30 p.m., Cancer Center Family Room 4C-365. Facilitator: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5273

MOVE! Weight Management Support Group

Meets 1st and 3rd Friday every month, 9 a.m., Room 4C-122. Facilitator: Alicia Merritt, 713-791-1414, ext. 6166/3976

Parkinson's Disease Education & Support Group

Contact facilitator for more information: Shawna Johnson, 713-794-8410

Prostate Cancer Support Group

Meets 3rd Thursday every month, 1-2 p.m., Cancer Center Conference Room 4C-345. Facilitator: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, 713-791-1414, ext. 5273

Stroke Support Group

Meets 3rd Tuesday every month, 3 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Day Room, Room 2B-210. Facilitators: Kathryn Kertz, 713-791-1414, ext. 4192 & Laura Lawhon, 713-794-7814

Vet-to-Vet Support & Education Group

Meets every Wednesday, 6 p.m., Room 6B-118; every Thursday, 9 a.m., 6B-117; and every Thursday, 11 a.m., Room 6C-167. Veteran facilitator. info: Cristy Gamez-Galka, 713-791-1414, ext. 4378

Talk to the Social Worker in Your Clinic or on Your Unit for more information.

Michael E. DeBakey
Veterans Affairs Medical Center
2002 Holcombe Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77030
713-791-1414

www.houston.va.gov
www.facebook.com/HoustonVAMC
www.twitter.com/vahouston

Adam C. Walmus, MHA, MA, FACHE, Director
Bryan Bayley, MHA, FACHE, Deputy Director
J. Kalavar, MD, Chief of Staff
Thelma Gray-Becknell, RN, MSN, Associate Director for Patient Care Services
James W. Scheurich, MD, Deputy Chief of Staff
Francisco Vazquez, MBA, Associate Director
Bobbi Gruner, MSBA, APR, Communications Director
Frances M. Burke, Public Affairs Specialist
Nikki Verbeck, Social Media Specialist
Quentin Melson, Public Affairs Specialist (TCF Intern)
Mike Spratt, BSCE, PE, AudioVisual Supervisor
Shawn James, AudioVisual Specialist
Mike Lane, AudioVisual Specialist
Regit Sasser, AudioVisual Specialist
Deborah Williams, AudioVisual Specialist
Kenneth Davis, Communications Assistant

This publication is funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs and is an authorized publication for Veterans of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. Contents of the newspaper are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the United States Government or the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA Star is produced bi-monthly by Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Communications Office, Room 4A-370, mailcode 580/00A-C, telephone number 713-794-7349, e-mail address bobbi.gruner@va.gov. Your comments, suggestions, ideas, and questions are always appreciated. All submissions are subject to editing and will not be returned to the sender.

1 Out of Every 5 People Will Develop Skin Cancer

HOUSTON - Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer occurring in the United States. It is also the most rapidly increasing cancer. For the past 30 years, skin cancers have been increasing by about three percent each year. One person out of every five in the U.S. will develop skin cancer sometime during their life. It is estimated about half of all people who live to age 65 years will develop at least one form of skin cancer.

The good news is skin cancer can be prevented, or if caught early, highly curable. In fact, if detected early, skin cancer is almost 100 percent curable.

Skin cancer can be divided into two major types: nonmelanoma and melanoma skin cancer. Malignant melanoma (MM) is the more deadly of the two.

The American Cancer Society estimates there are more than one million people diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancers each year. Approximately 65,000 people will be diagnosed with malignant melanoma.

Even though malignant melanoma is diagnosed far less often, MM skin cancers will take more lives than any other type of skin cancer, causing about 8,000 deaths per year. That represents

about one malignant melanoma death every hour. Malignant melanoma is responsible for 80 percent of all skin cancer deaths.

The primary cause of all types of skin cancer is exposure to ultraviolet radiation (UV) - the sun. It is easy to get a sunburn in Texas because of the state's geographic location, mild climate, and the many opportunities to work and play outside. Reflection of the sun's rays off water, sand, or snow can double ultraviolet radiation exposure.

Clouds do not block UV rays. When the weather is cloudy and cool, we may not realize the amount of UV exposure until after we have developed a sunburn.

A recent multi-center study showed we get less than 25 percent of our total sun exposure by age 18. In fact, it is men over the age of 40 who spend the most time outdoors and get the highest annual doses of UV rays. Since adult Americans are living longer and spending more leisure time outdoors, preventing ongoing skin damage is an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

Besides avoiding the sun, early diagnosis and treatment are the next best prevention option. Make it a habit to

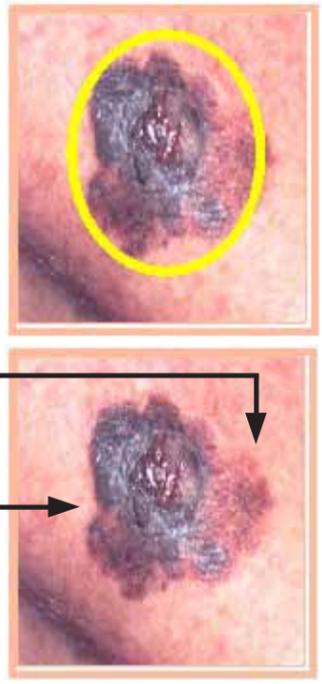
ABCDs of Moles

A Asymmetry
Half of the mole looks different from the other.

B Border
The edge appears ragged, notched, or blurred.

C Color
The mole has a variety of hues and colors.

D Diameter
Any mole that differs from others, changes, itches, or bleeds, even if it is smaller than 6 millimeters, should be looked at by a dermatologist.



check your skin for abnormalities and changes. Look at each of your moles and evaluate them using the following test:

Asymmetry: When the lesion is divided into halves, if the right half does NOT look like the left half, it is asymmetrical in shape.

Border: Moles with irregular or poorly defined borders should be reported. The borders appear notched or seem to fade or "stream out" onto the surrounding skin.

Color: Is the color of the individual mole varied? Does the mole have tan, brown, black, blue, red, or white areas?

Diameter: Is the mole larger than the size of a pencil eraser?

Although six millimeters is used as a general guideline for evaluating growth of a mole, any mole that is asymmetrical, has an irregular border, has color variations, bleeds, itches, and is *changing* should be evaluated by your VA health care provider. A positive finding of any of the ABCDs may indicate the mole is a malignant melanoma.

Malignant melanoma can develop anywhere on your body. Remember to wear appropriate protective attire including long sleeves and hats, use sunscreens, and do regular self-examinations of your skin. Protect your eyes from the harmful ultraviolet rays by using gray or brown lenses that offer both UVA and UVB protection.

An exam is recommended every three years for persons between the age of 20 to 40 years, and every year for anyone age 40 and older. Get regular checkups and take precautions in the sun.

If you have questions, ask your VA Health Care Team. They can help you learn how to prevent sunburns or schedule a cancer-related checkup including a skin exam. ♦



Be Prepared for 2012 Hurricane Season

For more information and tips, visit www.ready.gov or www.hurricanes.gov/prepare

Your Medications & Prescriptions:

- Have with you 15 days of medication and supplies
- For medications requiring refrigeration, have a small portable cooler/ice chest ready for transport
- Do not forget your glasses, contact lens, hearing aids, canes, and dentures
- Bring prescription bottles of all medications you are currently taking - whether full or empty
- For prescription needs if you are evacuated, call the VA Help Line at **1-800-507-4571**

Follow-up Care & Scheduled Appointments:

- Keep track of your scheduled appointments for follow-up visits, lab work, and specialty care services
- For urgent care needs requiring continuing care if you are evacuated, please contact any VA facility by calling the VA Help Line at **1-800-507-4571**
- Once you have returned to southeast Texas after an evacuation, re-schedule any appointments you may have missed by calling the Appointment Center at **1-800-639-5137**

Basic Emergency Supply Kit:

- Three gallons of water per person for drinking and sanitation
- At least a 3-day supply of non-perishable food for each person
- Battery-powered/hand crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert and extra batteries
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- First aid kit and whistle to signal for help
- Dust mask to help filter contaminated air, and plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter-in-place
- Moist towelettes, garbage bags, and plastic ties for personal sanitation
- Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- Local maps and list of emergency contacts
- Important family documents such as copies of insurance policies, birth certificates, deeds, driver's licenses or other I.D., and bank account records in a waterproof, portable container
- Personal care items including sunscreen, sunglasses, and hat

If You Have Special Health Care Needs:

Gulf coast residents with special health care needs (including those who are disabled or medically fragile) who live in evacuation zones and do not have friends or family to help in an evacuation should register for a ride in advance by dialing 2-1-1. The 2-1-1 registry must be dialed IN ADVANCE. Do not wait until a storm is in the Gulf to register for assistance. This service is for people who cannot drive themselves or make transportation arrangements.

Need Help or Assistance:

Talk with the social worker on your VA Health Care Team or call 713-791-1414, ext. 5729.

Program for Cocaine Users

You may be eligible to participate in a 4-month research study, conducted by the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Baylor College of Medicine, to test a study medication for cocaine abuse.

We are seeking volunteers who will be compensated for study participation. Call toll-free 1-877-807-3072. All calls are confidential.

Veterans' Questions

Answers provided by Patient Advocates in Consumer Affairs Room BA-200 (Basement) (713) 794-7884 or e-mail vhahougeneralquestions@va.gov

Q: How do I know the Houston VA has quality programs for homeless Veterans?

A: The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center was recently awarded a three-year accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for its Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans Program.

CARF is a private, not-for-profit organization that grew out of a need in the medical and vocational rehabilitation

fields to promote quality programs for people with disabilities and others in need of services. CARF is committed to developing and maintaining practical, customer-focused standards to help organizations measure and improve the quality, value, and optimal outcomes in the lives of the persons they serve.

A three-year accreditation is the highest level of accreditation an organization may be awarded. This is the first time that the newly created Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans Program has received CARF accreditation.

Q: How do I get more news about the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Veterans' health care?

A: Send an e-mail to bobbi.gruner@va.gov to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit www.houston.va.gov, like us on Facebook, or follow us on Twitter.

Q: I heard the Outpatient Pharmacy will stop doing refills at the Window. Is that true?

A: The Outpatient Pharmacy at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center fills almost 2,000 prescriptions at its window every day. Many of these are

for routine refills and non-urgent medications; consequently, creating long wait times for Veterans who have critical medication needs, are being discharged from the hospital, or were seen in the emergency room.

In an effort to reduce unacceptable, long waits for urgent medication needs, the Outpatient Pharmacy no longer accepts routine prescription refill requests or fill new, non-emergency medications at its window. Refills and non-urgent medications are mailed to Veterans.

The Outpatient Pharmacy will make exceptions for emergency situations on a case-by-case basis. This might include a Veteran who has run out of critical medications such as insulin or blood pressure medications.

To help solve this problem and to avoid running out of medicine, Veterans are urged to order their next refill as soon as they receive a delivery.

Use VA's MyHealthVet website at www.myhealth.va.gov. It is fast, easy, convenient, and secure.

To obtain a new prescription when no refills are left, Veterans must speak with their health care provider or contact the 24-hour VA Telecare Center at 713-794-8985 or toll-free 1-800-639-5137.

Q: Does the VA give free gun locks to Veterans and their family members?

A: Free gun safety locks are available from VA primary care physicians, mental health providers, and administrative officers. Gun safety locks are also

available at all seven Houston-area VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics.

Q: Is it okay to ask my nurse or doctor to wash his or her hands?

A: Yes. It is your right to ask each and every one of health care providers to clean their hands or wear gloves. Doctors, nurses, dentists, and other health care providers come into contact with lots of bacteria and viruses. So, before they treat you, ask them if they have cleaned their hands.

Health care providers should wear clean gloves when they perform tasks such as taking throat cultures, taking blood, touching wounds or body fluids, or examining any part of your body.

Question: I want to get more information about Agent Orange.

A: For information about special issues such as Gulf War, Agent Orange, Project Shad, Mustard Agents and Lewisite, and Ionizing Radiation, call the VA at 1-800-749-8387.

Question: I received a call asking me for my credit card number number to do a VA health care survey. Is this legitimate?

A: No. If you have received a call asking for personal financial information such as your social security number or credit card numbers, please let us know immediately by calling 713-383-2791. The VA will never call and ask you to disclose personal financial information over the phone.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center	713-791-1414 toll-free 1-800-553-2278
VA Network Telecare Center	713-794-8985 toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic	409-981-8550 toll-free 1-800-833-7734
Conroe VA Outpatient Clinic	936-522-4000 toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 1949
Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic	409-761-3200 toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12600
Lufkin - Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic	936-671-4300 toll-free 1-800-209-3120
Lake Jackson VA Outpatient Clinic	979-230-4852
Richmond VA Outpatient Clinic	832-595-7700 toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12800
Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic	409-986-2900 toll-free 1-800-553-2278, ext. 12900
Pharmacy Refills	713-794-7648 toll-free 1-800-454-1062 or www.myhealth.va.gov
Veterans Crisis Line	toll-free 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Caregiver Support Hotline	toll-free 1-855-260-3274
Appointment Center	toll-free 1-800-639-5137
Automated Appointment Information	713-794-7648 toll-free 1-800-454-1062
VA Eligibility & Enrollment	713-794-7288
Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program	713-794-7848
Homeless Veterans Drop-In Center (1418 Preston St.)	713-794-7533
Hotline for Homeless Veterans	toll-free 1-877-4AID VET
Assistance for Returning Troops from Iraq/Afghanistan	
Team Members	713-794-7034/8825/7928
Vet Center (701 N. Post Oak Road)	713-682-2288
Vet Center (2990 Richmond Ave.)	713-523-0884
Vet Center (14300 Cornerstone Village Dr.)	713-578-4002
Vet Center (990 IH 10 North, Ste. 180, Beaumont) ...	409-981-8576
Patient Advocates	
Houston/Lake Jackson	713-794-7884
Beaumont	1-800-833-7734, ext. 113
Conroe	936-522-4010, ext. 1952
Galveston/Texas City	713-791-1414, ext. 6586
Lufkin	936-671-4362
Richmond	832-595-7700
Houston VA National Cemetery	281-447-8686
Houston VA Regional Office	713-383-1999 toll-free 1-800-827-1000



My Health, My Care: 24/7 Access to VA

- Refill your VA prescriptions online - no waiting in line!
- Send secure emails to your doctor!
- Get answers to your medical questions fast!
- Access parts of your official VA health record!
- See your prescription history!
- View upcoming VA appointments and check lab results!
- Improve the efficiency and safety of your health care!
- Access free and reliable health resources!
- Get personalized VA appointment & wellness reminders!

Visit www.myhealth.va.gov and register today!

It's fast, easy, convenient, and secure!

To complete your in-person authentication, contact **MyHealthVet Coordinator Curtis Bergeron** in Prime Care or ask for a Clinic Administrative Assistant. At the Outpatient Clinics, ask for the Administrative Assistant.

For more information, call 713-791-1414, ext. 6348 or e-mail vhahoumyhealthvet@va.gov TODAY!