Heal Your Ailing Heart

Program Spotlight: Cardiac Care
Dear Veterans,

On behalf of VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System’s leadership team and our dedicated staff, please allow me to introduce the inaugural edition of our triannual newsletter, Veterans Connect.

We designed this newsletter to familiarize you with our services and to answer your questions on care and access. Veterans Connect will also serve to inform you of our progress transforming VA into a world-class, customer-focused, Veteran-centric service organization.

Inside these pages, you will find details on everything from new programs using state-of-the-art health care technologies to the latest recommendations for adopting and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Thank you, Veterans, for choosing VA Pittsburgh to serve your health care needs. I hope you find this first edition of Veterans Connect to be helpful, educational and informative. Once you’ve taken a look at it, please feel free to contact us with questions and suggestions at VAPHSEditor@va.gov.

Sincerely,

Karin McGraw, MSN, FACHE
Medical Center Director

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VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM OVERVIEW

University Drive campus
- 146 medical/surgical beds
- 78 inpatient psychiatric beds

H.J. Heinz campus
- 225 Community Living Center beds
- 65 Veterans Recovery Center beds

Five Community Based Outpatient Clinics: Beaver, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties in Pennsylvania, plus Belmont County in Ohio.

Three Vet Centers: Pittsburgh, McKeesport and Wheeling, W. Va.

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System is one of the largest and most progressive VA medical centers in the country, serving approximately 70,000 Veterans annually.
Improving Access to Care
MyVA Access: Care when you need it

Same-Day Mental Health Services
University Drive | 412-360-6600
Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.*
Health care professionals immediately see Veterans in crisis or in need of urgent mental health care or medications. Veterans new to behavioral health with non-urgent needs will receive an initial evaluation by the next calendar day. Walk-in or by appointment.
*Same-day medication service is walk-in only and closes at 4 p.m.

Same-Day Primary Care Services
Veterans in need of care right away are helped that day, either via face-to-face visits, returned phone calls, secure messaging or by scheduling a future appointment, telehealth or video care visit. After hours needs are addressed the very next day.

Rapid Access Clinic
Through our Rapid Access Clinics, we expedite the scheduling of follow-up appointments for Veterans who have received care in our emergency department.

Secure Messaging
www.myhealth.va.gov
Secure messaging is a web-based service for communicating online with VA health care teams. Use it to manage appointments, request medication renewals and more.

Audiology and Optometry
Direct Scheduling
Audiology: 412-360-6400
Optometry: 412-360-6700
You no longer need a Primary Care physician referral to schedule routine audiology (hearing) or optometry (vision) appointments.

Nurse Call Center
412-822-2222 | 1-866-482-7488 (toll free)
Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Veterans will press 3 to reach a registered nurse for advice on medical and mental health questions. Calls after hours are forwarded to a 24-hour call center.

MyVA311
1-844-MyVA311 (698-2311)
VA’s new toll-free national number is the go-to source for Veterans and their families who aren’t sure which of VA’s 1,000+ numbers to call.

Vets.gov
Vets.gov is an all-in-one resource for Veterans to discover, apply for, track and manage their health care, education, employment, disability and other benefits.

WAIT TIME UPDATE

Average appointment wait times (as of October 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Wait Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Care</td>
<td>5 DAYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty Care</td>
<td>7 DAYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>1.5 DAYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed within 30 days of clinically indicated or Veteran’s preferred date</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VETERANS CONNECT | fall 2016
Audiology: Services for hearing, tinnitus and balance disorders. 412-360-6400

Behavioral Health: Consultation, evaluation and treatment. 412-360-6600

Caregiver Services: Help at home and someone to listen. 412-822-2364 or 1-855-260-3274

Center for Treatment of Addictive Disorders: Outpatient and residential treatment for the misuse of alcohol, prescribed medications or other substances. Residential: 412-360-6611 Outpatient: 412-360-6092

Chaplain Services: Chaplains protect patients’ religious rights and facilitate outside clergy visits. 412-822-1551

Community Based Care: Services to help chronically ill or disabled Veterans of any age remain in their homes. 412-822-2910

Connected Care: Through telehealth, VA Mobile and more, we deliver care to Veterans where and when they need it. 412-360-3235

Critical Care: Inpatient care for life-threatening injuries and illnesses. 412-360-6215 (CCU, ICU, etc.)

Dental: 412-822-2130

Emergency Department: 24-hour emergency health care, including mental health services. 412-360-6322

Eye Clinic: 412-360-6700

Homeless Veterans: Transitional and permanent housing, case management, dental and medical care. 412-822-1272

Help for Homeless Veterans hotline: 877-4AID-VET (424-3838)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Veterans: Culturally and clinically competent care for LGBT Veterans. 412-360-1210

Military Sexual Trauma: Help for any Veteran who experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment during military service. 412-360-1040

My HealtheVet: Online access to health records, electronic messaging and prescription refills. www.myhealth.va.gov 412-360-6838

Pathology and Laboratory: 24-hour clinical and diagnostic testing. 412-360-1572

Pharmacy: Refill prescriptions by phone, mail or the internet. 412-822-3140

Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation: Inpatient and outpatient physical, occupational, and kinesiotherapy, low vision and blind rehab services. 412-822-2111

Primary Care: Annual checkups, nutrition counseling, and more. 412-822-3000

Podiatry: 412-360-6700

Prosthetics: Devices and services to restore independence, mobility, and dignity. 412-822-3728

Radiology: X-ray, ultrasound, CT, and MRI. 412-360-6216

Research: Improving lives through health care discovery and innovation. 412-360-2386

Speech Pathology: Treatments for speech, language, voice, cognitive communication, swallowing impairments and training for stroke patients. 412-360-6400

Spinal Cord Injury: 412-822-3000

Surgical Services: Same-day surgery, neurosurgery and cardiothoracic, hand, ophthalmology, orthopedic, otolaryngology, plastic and vascular surgery. 412-360-6700

Transition and Care Management Program: Health care tailored to post-911 Veterans. 412-822-2362

Vet Centers: Counseling and referral services to combat Veterans and their families, as well as any Veteran who was sexually traumatized while serving. McKeesport: 412-678-7704 Pittsburgh: 412-920-1765 Wheeling: 304-232-0587

Veterans Crisis Line: Confidential help for Veterans in crisis and their families and friends. www.veteranscrisisline.net 1-800-273-8255 (press 1) Text to 838255

Voluntary and Recreation Services: 412-822-3098

Women’s Health Services: 412-360-6289

Not all Veterans are eligible for every service listed.

For a more comprehensive list of services, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/services
Vietnam Veteran Kathie Swazuk kept her 13-month stint with the Army Nurse Corps a secret when she returned home in 1970. “Coming home was horrible,” said Swazuk, 68, of McCandless. “They told us to change out of our uniforms and not tell anybody where we had been.”

Swazuk only recently began to speak openly about her service. “It was such a different time,” Swazuk said. “A lot of my fellow Veterans kept a lot locked up inside.”

Swazuk is among more than 100 Vietnam Veterans who were finally welcomed home this past year, when VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System held two separate events commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. Held in March and November at University Drive and H.J. Heinz campuses, the commemorations were the first of six planned over the next three years to thank Vietnam Veterans and their families for their sacrifices.

For some Veterans in attendance, the events marked a long overdue public “thank you” for their service. During Vietnam, returning Veterans were often ignored or met with anger and hostility by antiwar activists.

“It came back home on a stretcher and didn’t expect what I saw, which was our guys getting spit on and called baby killers,” said Vietnam Veteran Bob Szoszorak, 66, an Army infantryman wounded by a Claymore mine. “Thankfully, now, there’s a lot more respect for Veterans returning home.”

VA Pittsburgh Director Karin McGraw emphasized the need to correct past wrongs. “You were often blamed for a war you didn’t start, when you should have been commended for serving your country with valor,” McGraw told Veterans and their family members. “You came home and were sometimes denigrated when you should have been celebrated.”

VA is one of more than 9,000 organizations across the country serving as Commemorative Partners to honor our nation’s 7 million living Vietnam Veterans. The Vietnam War Commemoration recognizes the 9 million American men and women who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces from Nov. 1, 1955 to May 15, 1975, making no distinction among Veterans who served in-country, in-theater, or were stationed elsewhere during those 20 years. All answered the call of duty.
Heal Your Ailing Heart
Optimize Your Cardiac Care at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

Two months after undergoing a triple bypass at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, Army Veteran Robert Emmerich eagerly demonstrated his recovery progress in the health system’s cardiac-rehab unit.

“The program is fantastic,” Emmerich said, stepping onto one of three treadmills at the University Drive facility to begin his medically supervised workout. “I get a lot of expert information and tutelage.”

VA Pittsburgh’s cardiac rehabilitation program is just one component of a full spectrum of therapies available to heal ailing hearts. One of the largest VA cardiology programs in the U.S., our care team is staffed by experienced physicians dedicated to providing Veterans with advanced, world-class care.

Services include cardiac catheterization, electrophysiology, cardiac surgery, heart failure therapy, cardiac telemetry, echocardiography and nuclear stress testing, and cardiac rehabilitation. “From cardiac surgery to heart-failure care, the expertise and technology available make it possible for us to offer the best care to Veterans,” says Dr. Suresh Mulukutla, chief of cardiology.

CARDIAC CATHETERIZATION
Healing hearts starts by finding or eliminating the culprit behind a cardiac event. Available around the clock, our Cardiac Cath Lab lets our doctors pinpoint the cause of heart failure, open narrowed heart vessels, and evaluate coronary heart disease and heart defects.

“If a Veteran comes into our hospital complaining of chest pain and is having a heart attack, the Cath Lab is immediately mobilized to provide rapid care to the patient.”

Dr. Aref Rahman, director, Cardiac Catheterization

CARDIAC ELECTROPHYSIOLOGY
When your heart is off its regular beat, our cardiologists find out why in our Electrophysiology Lab. We use 3D-mapping, multichannel recording and high-resolution biplane fluoroscopy to determine your best treatment options.

“With multiple ways of imaging, our state-of-the-art lab minimizes risks involved with these procedures and provides a speedy approach to dealing with abnormal rhythms.”

Dr. Alaa Shalaby, director, Electrophysiology

CARDIAC SURGERY
Our regional cardiac surgery center provides a wide range of cardiac surgical therapies.

“We perform all aspects of complex cardiac surgical procedures. We also use a well-established multidisciplinary heart team approach, in concert with our cardiology team, to provide the best treatment options for our Veterans.”

Dr. Danny Chu, director, Cardiac Surgery
CARDIAC REHABILITATION

Our innovative, exercise-based cardiac rehab program allows our physicians to monitor your recovery progress—here or at home—to help you strengthen and maintain a healthy heart.

“Cardiac rehab helps Veterans who have had a cardiac event, or who are living with heart disease, to better regain full function so they can engage in their lives with comfort and the confidence to be active.”

Dr. Daniel Forman, director, Cardiac Rehabilitation

VA Pittsburgh earned the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association’s prestigious Get With The Guidelines® - Heart Failure Gold Plus and Atrial Fibrillation Silver quality achievement awards.

BY THE NUMBERS

Our dynamic program serves thousands of Veterans annually:

1,200 PROCEDURES performed in our cardiac catheterization lab

3,000 ECHOCARDIOGRAMS

200 HEART SURGERIES performed by VA Pittsburgh surgeons

2,500 CLINIC VISITS + 650 CONSULTS handled through our electrophysiology lab

Numbers are approximate.
Antioxidants. We know they play a role in preventing debilitating medical conditions such as Alzheimer’s, cancer and heart disease, but what exactly are they?

Antioxidants are substances that protect body cells from damage caused by free radicals. Free radicals are toxic molecules found in cigarette smoke, air pollutants, and chemicals. They harm healthy cells through a process called oxidation. Antioxidants neutralize free radicals, preventing oxidation.

Where do we find antioxidants?
Many foods, including fruits and vegetables, contain antioxidants such as vitamins C and E, carotene and lycopene. Foods that are high in antioxidants include berries, beans, fruits, vegetables, herbs, oat-based grains, green and black tea, and cocoa. For example:
- Vitamin A and carotenoids are found in carrots, pumpkin, eggs, broccoli, peaches and apricots.
- Vitamin C is found in oranges, grapefruit, bell peppers, garlic, broccoli and asparagus.
- Vitamin E is found in nuts and seeds, whole grains, spinach, broccoli and liver oil.
- Selenium is found in fish and shellfish, red meat, grains, eggs and poultry.

Antioxidant supplements do not provide the same beneficial effect found from consuming antioxidant-rich foods. Maximize the beneficial health effects of antioxidants by including in your diet a variety of different foods containing the substances.

In addition, foods abundant in antioxidants typically are plant based, offering numerous health benefits beyond the protective power of antioxidants. Such foods are generally low in saturated fat and cholesterol and are packed with fiber and other vitamins and nutrients.

To bump up antioxidants in your diet, try adding these foods to your meals and snacks:
- Breakfast: Enjoy ½ cup of blueberries or raspberries with cereal and sip on green or black tea.
- Lunch: Swap potato chips for crunchy baby carrots or add sliced avocado to sandwiches.
- Dinner: Add artichoke hearts as a salad topping or mix one teaspoon of garlic powder into mashed potatoes.
- Dessert: Savor dark chocolate to satisfy sweet cravings.

Sources: Mayo Clinic, American Dietetic Association, Huntington’s Outreach Project for Education, at Stanford (HOPES)

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Arugula with Pomegranates, Blue Cheese and Pistachios

Salad:
4 cups arugula
1/2 cup pomegranate arils
1/4 cup crumbled blue cheese
2 tablespoons pistachios, shelled

Pomegranate Vinaigrette:
1 teaspoon pomegranate juice
1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar
2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil
salt and fresh pepper

Directions:
1. Whisk vinegar, pomegranate juice, olive oil, salt and pepper in a small bowl.
2. Place arugula on two plates, top with blue cheese, pomegranates, pistachios and vinaigrette.

Servings: 2 | Calories: 195.3
Fat: 13 g, Protein: 6.7 g, Carb: 13.7 g, Fiber: 3.9 g

Source: www.skinnytaste.com
Jim Evans takes advocating for his fellow Veterans to heart. A former Air Force cryptographic repair technician, Evans chose VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System for his open-heart surgery.

VA Pittsburgh performs upwards of 200 heart surgeries annually at its University Drive campus. Evans describes the care he received as “excellent,” but the 72-year-old Allegheny County man felt something was missing.

“Anybody who’s ever had open heart surgery will tell you they don’t know how you can do without a pillow to hug, in recovery,” Evans said.

Following heart surgery, patients are directed to hold a rolled blanket or small pillow against their chests to ease discomfort when coughing or sneezing. The practice helps prevent post-operative complications.

When Evans had surgery in January, VA Pittsburgh used rolled blankets in lieu of small, heart-shaped pillows available specifically for that purpose. Evans said his nurse “gave that extra effort” by personalizing his blanket-pillow with a hand-drawn heart and the message “Hug Me,” but he left the hospital with a mission in mind.

“I started looking on the Internet for companies that made heart pillows, and that’s when I decided it was doable, to raise money to donate pillows,” Evans said.

With the help of American Legion Post 980 in Plum where he is a 27-year member and an officer, Evans undertook a “Huggable Pillows” fundraiser. The campaign raised nearly $7,000 for the purchase of 400 heart-shaped pillows, which are distributed free of charge to Veterans who undergo heart surgery at the health care system’s University Drive campus.

The colorful pillows feature an anatomically correct depiction of a heart on one side and the message “Huggable Pillows Donated by Veterans & Friends” on the other. They complement disposable, therapeutic “cough pillows” VA Pittsburgh has since begun carrying for its surgery patients.

“I have never been so excited about doing anything in my life,” said Evans, when describing the fundraiser. “I have goosebumps.”

Evans’ next mission is to inspire others to volunteer.

“My message... is to look around in your neighborhood, to look at your local clinics, to see what’s needed, or where volunteer services are needed,” Evans said.

Jim Evans raised nearly $7,000 to purchase therapeutic pillows for VA Pittsburgh’s heart surgery patients.
FOCUS ON WOMEN’S HEALTH

Tailoring Care to Women’s Needs

Women rank as one of the fastest growing segments of the Veterans’ population, with the number of female Veterans seeking care at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System alone more than doubling in the last decade.

With that figure expected to double once again over the next 20 years, VA Pittsburgh is already well positioned to meet women Veterans’ health care needs, according to Dr. Melissa McNeil, medical director for the Women’s Health Clinic.

“VA Pittsburgh is a place where women can, and should, feel comfortable,” said McNeil. “We are not your father’s VA.”

Considered a model for other health care providers, VA Pittsburgh offers a one-stop health care model unavailable elsewhere in the region. McNeil said the Women’s Health Clinic not only provides gender-specific screening and care, but also tends to each patient’s various other medical needs, to include preventive care.

“In one place, you can get your blood pressure taken care of, your flu shot, your Pap smear, your contraception, and have a provider who is uniquely qualified to talk to you about being a woman and the needs of your health that come with being a woman,” McNeil said.

Women Veterans receive care from Designated Women’s Health Providers (DWHP) who serve as their primary care providers. Specially trained in gender-specific health care needs, each DWHP undergoes twice yearly continuing medical education.

“Having a DWHP reduces the number of appointments our female Veterans have to schedule by providing gender specific, comprehensive health care, all in one place,” said Valera Posa, manager of VA Pittsburgh’s Women Veterans Program.

Women’s services are available at both Pittsburgh campuses and all five Community Based Outpatient Clinics. The University Drive campus reserves a separate, child friendly waiting area for women Veterans to protect their privacy.

Among the services available to women Veterans are: screenings for colon, breast and cervical cancers; gynecological care; birth control; pelvic floor physical therapy training; behavioral health services; intimate partner violence counseling; and care for conditions related to military sexual trauma.

TO YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Five easy ways to get a FLU SHOT

Arm yourself with a flu shot against the fever, chills, muscle aches, cough, congestion, runny nose, headaches and fatigue of influenza.

1. Visit primary care at either campus weekdays, except federal holidays, through March 31.

2. Visit University Drive’s Emergency Department during evenings, weekends or federal holidays.

3. Stop by your local Community-Based Outpatient Clinic.

4. Ask to receive a free flu shot during any scheduled VA Pittsburgh appointment or from your visiting VA nurse.

5. Take your VA health care identification card to any Walgreens for a free flu shot.

For more information on flu shots: www.pittsburgh.va.gov/flushots.asp
VetQ&A
Answering Your Important Questions

Q. Am I eligible for the Choice Program?
A. There are different ways to qualify, but all Choice care must be preauthorized by VA. If you believe you may be eligible, please speak with your primary care team. To learn more about Choice care, visit www.va.gov/opa/ChoiceAct.

Q. Where can my family stay while I receive inpatient care at VA Pittsburgh?
A. The Pittsburgh Fisher House offers inpatient Veterans’ families free accommodations on our Oakland campus that include one bedroom and a shared kitchen, laundry, dining room, living room, library and toys for children. Social worker consult required. Restrictions apply. Contact: 412-360-2030 or visit pittsburghfisherhouse.org.

Q. Who is eligible for the Agent Orange and Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit registries?
A. The Agent Orange Registry is open to Vietnam Veterans who served for any length of time between 1962 and 1975, with Pittsburgh’s 911th Airlift Wing (758th Airlift Squadron), on Vietnam’s inland waterways, and in certain regions of Korea and Thailand. For more detailed information, please visit www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/locations/index.asp. The Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry is open to Veterans who served in Southwest Asia and certain other locations after Aug. 2, 1990. For more information, please visit www.publichealth.va.gov.

Q. How do I obtain a copy of my VA medical records?
A. Your VA medical records are maintained at the location(s) where you were provided medical care. You must contact each location in writing to request copies. Indicate which records you are requesting and why, and to whom they are to be released. For a listing of facility addresses, visit www.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp.

Need an answer?
Send your health care questions to VAPHSEditor@va.gov or call 412-822-3479.

Veterans Connect strives to deliver health care news and information of interest to area Veterans.
Please send your suggestions, comments and requests for future content to VAPHSEditor@va.gov or give us a call at 412-822-3479.
Don’t Miss a Thing!

Save the Date!
2017 Veterans Town Halls
Veterans Town Halls at VA Pittsburgh campuses
• March 15 | 1 - 2:30 p.m. University Drive campus
• June 20 | 1 - 2:30 p.m. H.J. Heinz campus
• Sept. 26 | 10 - 11:30 a.m. University Drive campus

Veterans Town Halls on the Move
• April 4 | Westmoreland
• May 16 | Beaver
• May 25 | Belmont
• July 12 | Washington

For more details, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/calendar.asp

The Veteran Appointment Request App is Here!
Veterans — take charge of scheduling your primary and mental health appointments from your smart phone, tablet or other mobile device.
To get started, go online or call toll-free to sign up for a DS Logon Level 2 (Premium) Account:
1 mobile.va.gov/dslogon
2 1-800-983-0937
A Level 2 account is necessary to connect securely to your Electronic Health Record (EHR).

Park & Shuttle at VA Highland
Avoid the stress of city driving and parking congestion with our free shuttle service from Highland to University Drive! The shuttle departs every 30 minutes, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday.
To learn more, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/park-and-shuttle.asp
Location: 7180 Highland Dr. Pittsburgh, PA 15206

Million Veteran Program
You can help improve health care by participating in the Million Veteran Program, the world’s largest research resource for genetic, military, lifestyle and health information. To learn more, call 866-441-6075 or visit www.research.va.gov/mvp

For more information, visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/calendar.asp