Dear Veterans,

Our primary goal at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System is to provide you with the best available care, where and when you need it. One of the biggest challenges in meeting that goal is geography. Many of you live outside the city of Pittsburgh or have health conditions that make travel difficult. Time and distance are your greatest obstacles to receiving care at our Oakland and O’Hara Township campuses.

As the nation’s largest integrated health care system, VA is uniquely positioned to eliminate barriers to care and is a recognized world leader in development and use of revolutionary technologies in telehealth. Telehealth uses technology to connect Veterans with providers, essentially bringing VA care to you in your community—or even your home. In fact, VA last year served more than 702,000 Veterans through telehealth encounters across the U.S., including 25,682 here at VA Pittsburgh.

VA telehealth emphasizes ensuring care is convenient, accessible and patient-centered, especially for Veterans in rural and remote locations. Nearly half of VA’s telehealth users last year—45 percent—lived in rural communities with otherwise limited access to VA care. VA anticipates the number of Veterans who receive telehealth care at its more than 900 locations will grow by approximately 4 percent in 2017.

In this issue of Veterans Connect, we focused on telehealth to give you an idea of some of the services that are available at VA Pittsburgh. If you think you might benefit from telehealth services, talk to your primary care provider or any member of your Patient Aligned Care Team.

Sincerely,

Karin L. McGraw, MSN, FACHE
Medical Center Director

Front cover: With teleretinal health, high resolution images captured at any VA Pittsburgh facility are securely sent to providers at University Drive for diagnosis and treatment.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO CARE: WAIT TIME UPDATE

The wait times listed below are the most recent available for our University Drive and H.J. Heinz sites from VA’s Access and Quality in VA Healthcare tool as of publication.* The online resource at www.accesstocare.va.gov is easy to use and breaks down data at each of our two main sites and five community-based clinics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIVERSITY DRIVE</th>
<th>H.J. HEINZ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 DAYS Primary Care</td>
<td>5 DAYS Primary Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 DAY Mental Health Care</td>
<td>3 DAYS Mental Health Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data presented is for return appointments for established patients as of Sept. 4, 2017. Data previously published here and elsewhere since June 2014 was drawn from www.va.gov/health/access-audit.asp, which will continue to update every two weeks. The two sites present data through different, but meaningful, data definitions.
Emergency Care at a Non-VA Facility

Life-threatening emergencies strike without warning. Would you know what to do? Don’t lose precious minutes. Know what to do before an emergency. The life you save could be your own.

What do I do if I need immediate medical care?
If you are having a life-threatening medical emergency, call 911 or visit the nearest emergency room. Please note: If it is a non-VA facility, VA pay depends on multiple factors and is not guaranteed, even if it is a true emergency.

When do I notify VA?
You must contact Community Care Clinic at VA Pittsburgh at 412-822-2500 within 72 hours of being seen to be considered for payment. Depending on your eligibility, VA may pay all, some or none of the charges.

Do I need VA approval to be admitted to a non-VA facility in an emergency?
You do not need permission if the admission is for a true medical emergency, or if the emergency is related to a service-connected injury or illness.

Will VA pay for my emergency care at a non-VA facility?
VA payment is not guaranteed. Pay depends on your eligibility and whether the incident is a true medical emergency.

How long will VA pay for non-VA emergency care?
VA will pay for community care only until you are medically stable. When you are medically stable, ask to be transferred as soon as possible to the nearest Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). Ensure the hospital documents attempts to transfer, especially if unsuccessful.

Who does the non-VA provider call to arrange my transfer to VA Pittsburgh when I am medically stable?
VA Pittsburgh’s Bed Management Center at 412-360-1078.

KNOW WHAT TO DO IN A MEDICAL EMERGENCY

VETERAN – If you are having a medical emergency:
Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.
If it is not a Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC):
  » Request/accept transfer to the nearest VAMC when you are medically stable.
  » Report the visit/hospitalization to your primary care VAMC within 72 hours or upon discharge.

HOSPITAL STAFF – If you have a Veteran/VA patient in emergency care:
1. Arrange transfer when patient is medically stable to nearest VAMC that can provide needed care. If VA Pittsburgh, call 412-360-1078 to coordinate care.
2. Document transfer attempts, especially if unsuccessful.
3. File hospital’s claim with nearest VAMC within 90 days of discharge.

RAPID ACCESS FOLLOW-UP CARE
Scheduling critical follow-up emergency care is now fast and easy with our Emergency Department Rapid Access Clinics (RACs). RACs set aside dedicated appointment slots in 18 specialty clinics so we can schedule your follow-up care before you leave the Emergency Department. Developed here at VA Pittsburgh, RACs are expanding to other VA medical centers nationwide.
Connect to Your Care

**Audiology:** 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:** 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:** Telehealth, VA Mobile and more. 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

**Environmental Registries:** 412-822-1707

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

**Pathology and Laboratory:** 412-360-1572

**Patient Advocate:** 412-360-3614 or 412-822-1562

**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:** 412-822-3728

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

**Rainbow Clinic:** 412-360-6242

**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

**Travel Office:** 412-360-3620 or 412-360-6783

**Vet Centers:** Counseling and referral for combat Veterans, their families and any Veteran who was sexually traumatized while serving. Pittsburgh: 412-920-1765 Wheeling: 304-232-0587 White Oak: 412-678-7704

**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
Veterans who were exposed to burn pits or other environmental hazards during their military service can document their concerns through one or more of six VA health registries. The registries help VA identify and respond more quickly to potential long-term health effects.

The six registries are Agent Orange, Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit, Depleted Uranium (DU), Gulf War, Ionizing Radiation, and Toxic Embedded Fragments. Eligible Veterans include, but are not limited to, those who served in Vietnam, the Gulf War and conflicts from the 2000s to the present.

The registries allow VA to collect health information from Veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange, burn pits, pesticides, oil-well fires, anthrax vaccinations, anti-nerve agents and other hazards. No-cost medical exams are mandatory with all but the Open Burn Pit registry.

"If there are any ways that your health has been affected by your service, we are here to support you."

"A registry exam documents the Veteran's exposure concerns; provides information on potential health impacts of those exposures and resources available to the Veteran related to the exposures; and serves as evidence to support any claims the Veteran may submit related to those exposures," said Dr. Stephen C. Hunt, director of VA’s Post-Deployment Integrative Care Initiative. "Most of all, it is an opportunity for our VA and our nation to say to our Veterans, we appreciate your service and we want to be sure that if there are any ways that your health has been affected by your service, we are here to support you."

For more information or to schedule an exam, call VA Pittsburgh’s Environmental Health Clinic at 412-822-1707. Details regarding each registry and eligibility are also available at www.publichealth.va.gov.

Please note: Health registry exams are not disability compensation exams and may not confirm exposure during service. The exams do not initiate claims, nor are they required to file or receive VA benefits.

### Military Exposures Classifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD OF MILITARY SERVICE</th>
<th>AGENT ORANGE</th>
<th>AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND OPEN BURN PIT</th>
<th>DEPLETED URANIUM FOLLOW-UP</th>
<th>GULF WAR</th>
<th>IONIZING RADIATION</th>
<th>TOXIC EMBEDDED FRAGMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940s-1950s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s-present</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Care Where You Need It
Telehealth Saves Time and Travel

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System uses innovative telehealth services from its major medical centers—and even their homes. From dermatology and audiology to diabetes education and sleep-lab services, VA Pittsburgh offers Veterans a growing number of telehealth services. Pittsburgh is also home to a VA Mental Health Telehealth Clinical Resource Center, a hub for rapid-access mental health care for Veterans in rural communities in 16 states, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean.

TELEMENTAL HEALTH
Outpatient clinics and Vet Centers use secure videoconferencing technology to connect Veterans with mental health providers in Pittsburgh. Veterans can address medication needs or receive treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and other concerns.

“Most Veterans who try telemental health stay with it. Some Veterans with PTSD prefer telemental health because the (video) screen offers a sense of safety.”
Dr. Sudeep Chakravorty, psychiatrist

TELERETINAL
State-of-the-art cameras capture high-definition retinal images so providers can diagnose and treat eye disorders. Teeralretinal care is of particular benefit to diabetic Veterans whose eyes are at risk for ruptured blood vessels.

“Blood vessels in the eye give us clues as to what else is happening in the body. High-resolution images supply providers with a great deal of information about a Veteran’s overall health.”
Margaret Felkay, COT, teeralretinal/ophthalmology surgical coordinator

TELEBARIATRIC SURGERY
Veterans who have bariatric weight-loss surgery can attend consults, follow-up appointments and group classes with nutritionists and dieticians via videoconferencing.

“Telehealth services have had a huge impact on follow-up care. Veterans who previously avoided bariatric surgery because they had to travel long distances for follow-up appointments are now benefiting from this procedure.”
Christie Rosick, MS, RD, LDN, clinical nutrition specialist

TELEDERMATOLOGY
High-definition photographs of skin conditions are captured and forwarded to VA Pittsburgh dermatologists. Dermatologists often diagnose and offer guidance without requiring the Veteran to travel to University Drive for a face-to-face exam.

“Teledermatology provides Veterans with a very quick turnaround for diagnosis, as soon as the next day. Providers can triage Veterans and get them into needed care quicker than through in-person care.”
Dr. William Leyva, chief, teledermatology

HOME TELEHEALTH
Home monitoring devices forward Veterans’ daily blood pressure readings, glucose levels and other health stats to Pittsburgh-based home telehealth nurses. Frequent communication helps Veterans better manage their symptoms, reducing emergency department visits and hospital stays.

“Home telehealth allows us to give Veterans peace of mind, knowing that their vital medical information is checked daily so we can catch and resolve problems early.”
Krista Culliver, nurse manager, Community Based Care services

TALK TO YOUR PRIMARY CARE TEAM ABOUT TELEHEALTH SERVICES AVAILABLE AT VA PITTSBURGH. LEARN MORE AT WWW.PITTSBURGH.VA.GOV/SERVICES/TELEHEALTH

BY THE NUMBERS
Transforming care through telehealth
52% use secure messaging
18% use telehealth
35,447 unique secure message encounters
7,955 telemental health care encounters provided for 2,309 unique patients
200+ use telehealth technology every day to communicate their health stats to their care team

Numbers are for Fiscal Year 2016
FOCUS ON
HEALTHY LIVING

Mind Your Portions

WHEN PLANNING MEALS, it’s important to mind your portions and serving sizes to avoid unwanted weight gain. We Americans consume far more calories than we did just 30 years ago, and it shows in our expanding waistlines. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than one-third of U.S. adults—36.5 percent—are obese.

The extra pounds are costly. CDC estimates obese Americans spend $1,429 more for medical care than those of normal weight. Health problems linked to obesity include type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and certain cancers.

The good news? You can fight obesity by paying attention to serving sizes. “Overeating by 100 to 200 calories a day can add on an extra 10 pounds a year,” said Allison Morell, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System dietitian. “That’s why it’s important to know the difference between portions and serving sizes.”

Portions are the amount of food you eat, Morell said, while serving sizes are set amounts food companies use to measure calories and nutrition. Serving sizes are listed on most food packaging.

Minding the difference between portions and serving sizes is a big step toward keeping your weight in check.

Managing Your Portion Size

- Measure or weigh food into serving sizes.
- Use small dishes and drinkware so serving sizes appear larger.
- Eat slowly and stop when you are full.
- Cut back on high-calorie sweets.
- Fill up on low-calorie fruits and vegetables.
- Split large restaurant portions into two meals.

Want to learn more? VA Pittsburgh’s MOVE! program helps Veterans meet diet and fitness goals. Contact Melanie Erskine at 412-822-3114.

Contributing sources: CDC and National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute

Stuffed Pepper Soup

Ingredients:
- 3 cups cooked brown rice
- 1 pound 95% lean ground beef
- 1/2 cup chopped green bell pepper
- 1/2 cup chopped red bell pepper
- 1 cup finely diced onion
- 3 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 14.5-ounce cans diced tomatoes
- 1 3/4 cups tomato sauce
- 2 cups reduced sodium, fat-free chicken broth
- 1/2 teaspoon dried marjoram
- Salt and fresh pepper to taste

Directions:

In a large pot, brown ground meat on high heat and season with salt. Drain any fat, reduce heat to medium-low, then add peppers, onions and garlic. Cook about 5 minutes on low heat. Add tomatoes, tomato sauce, chicken broth, marjoram and season with salt and pepper to taste. Cover and simmer on low heat for 30 minutes. Serve about 1 1/3 cups of soup in each bowl and top with 1/2 cup cooked brown rice. Makes 9.5 cups.

Servings: 6, Calories: 261, Fat: 5g, Carb: 37.5g, Fiber: 5g, Protein: 17.6g, Sugar: 6g, Sodium: 606g (without salt) Source: www.skinnytaste.com
Dr. Sudeep Chakravorty finds inspiration in the very Veterans he helps.

“It’s their kindness and grace,” said Chakravorty, a psychiatrist at the Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Telehealth Clinical Resource Center in Greentree. “That is what inspires and motivates me to keep trying to do better.”

One of the first of its kind in the U.S., the Greentree VA telemental hub is one of 11 nationwide providing enhanced mental health access to Veterans in rural communities. Secure videoconferencing remotely connects Veterans at VA outpatient clinics in 16 states, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean with mental health professionals in Greentree.

Chakravorty spent decades in private practice before starting four years ago at Greentree. He has served Veterans across the state and as far away as Florida. Chakravorty said when Veterans are apprehensive to talk with a doctor through a TV screen, he makes certain they feel welcome and comfortable before starting therapy.

“It’s my job to make that happen, and when it does, the television screen becomes almost seamless,” Chakravorty said. “It actually helps some Veterans because there is a certain sense of safety, with the silicone screen as a safety net.”

Telemental health can be especially helpful to Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, said Chakravorty, because talking with someone on a TV screen is less threatening than a face-to-face encounter. Should a Veteran experience a crisis during a telemental health session, medical staff are nearby to help.

“It’s a virtual office, where we reach through the screen to Veterans who are eager to talk,” said Chakravorty. “But if the picture changes, that’s why the medical personnel there are so important.”

Chakravorty described his work with Veterans as a privilege and an honor.

“They’ve done things from a sense of altruism that I could never personally hope to accomplish,” said Chakravorty. “Their military values of honor, integrity and perseverance come through the screen. That fills me with a great deal of respect.”

To learn more about telemental health options, talk to your primary care provider.

We’re removing geography as a barrier so we can speed up access for Veterans. We’ll be able to use VA providers in cities where there are a lot of doctors to help our Veterans in rural areas where there aren’t many health care professionals.”

Dr. David J. Shulkin, Secretary of Veterans Affairs
White House telehealth demonstration, Aug. 3, 2017
FOCUS ON
WOMEN’S HEALTH

VA Monitors Maternity Care

Navy Veteran Katie Valerdi credits VA Pittsburgh’s coordinated maternity care with helping her realize her dream of motherhood.

“My journey would not have been possible without their support,” said Valerdi, who delivered a healthy baby girl, Zoe, in May. “Their compassion, generosity and motivation far surpass expectations.”

Valerdi and her husband, Rigo, had difficulty conceiving and Valerdi experienced a miscarriage before becoming pregnant with Zoe. Although VA pays community providers for Veterans’ obstetrics care, Katie Valerdi said VA Pittsburgh and its Women’s Health Center were actively involved throughout her pregnancy.

“We always felt cared about and supported,” Valerdi said. “It meant as much to them as it did to us.”

VA maternity benefits begin with confirmation of pregnancy and continue through the first postpartum visit. Newborn care is covered for the first seven days after birth.

Accredited non-VA providers deliver obstetrics care to pregnant women Veterans and their newborns.

“One advantage for women Veterans with VA maternity benefits package is having a maternity care coordinator who stays in contact, monitors and supports them throughout and after their pregnancies,” said Cecilia Pruszynski, VA Pittsburgh’s maternity care coordinator.

My journey would not have been possible without their support.

Maternity care coordinators act as liaisons between Veterans and their community obstetricians. They ensure Veterans are up to date on relevant screenings and receive prenatal vitamins and other necessary prescriptions. They also work to identify problems such as stress and depression.

VA also reimburses costs to attend childbirth, parenting, nutrition and breastfeeding classes and provides a breast pump, nursing bras and all nursing supplies.

To learn more about our maternity care coordination, talk to your designated women’s health provider or call Cecilia Pruszynski at 412-360-3753.

GULF WAR SYNDROME

Veterans who served in Southwest Asia any time from Aug. 2, 1990, to the present may have medically unexplained illnesses presumed to be service connected.

Gulf War Veterans were exposed to oil well fires, anthrax vaccinations, infectious diseases, pesticides, sand, airborne particles and other environmental hazards that carried potential health risks.

Medically unexplained illnesses include chronic fatigue, headaches, joint pain, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory and memory problems. VA Pittsburgh has developed a new educational curriculum to ensure providers have the most up-to-date information regarding Gulf War illnesses.

Veterans who served in the Gulf during operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom or New Dawn are eligible for the Gulf War Registry exam, whether or not they have unexplained illnesses.

To schedule an exam, call 412-822-1707.
Q. If I am enrolled in VA health care, can I still see non-VA doctors and use my private health care insurance?
A. Veterans with Medicare or private health insurance can continue to maintain those coverages and see non-VA providers even though they are enrolled in VA health care. VA is permitted to bill third-party payers for non-service connected care. Copays for VA treatment may apply, based on the Veteran’s priority group. For more information on VA health care eligibility and enrollment, please contact our registration department at 412-360-6993.

Q. How do I sign up for Secure Messaging to communicate with my VA care team?
A. Similar to email, Secure Messaging lets you contact your VA care team online about appointments, medications, tests and more. To use it, register as a patient at www.myhealth.va.gov and then visit any VA Pittsburgh location, including outpatient clinics, to upgrade your account to premium. You can then exchange Secure Messages with your VA care team. For more information, contact VA Pittsburgh’s My Health eVet office at 412-360-6838.

Q. I’m having problems with my hearing aid. Do I need an audiology appointment?
A. If you are having problems with your hearing aid, VA Pittsburgh’s Hearing Aid Repair Clinic is here for you! The clinic will troubleshoot your hearing aid and make repairs. The clinic is first-come-first-serve, 10 to 11:30 a.m. Monday through Friday at our University Drive campus. If you are having hearing difficulties beyond troubleshooting your hearing aid, please call 412-360-6400 to schedule an audiology appointment.

Q. I am eligible for VA health care but am not service connected. Should I seek care elsewhere to free up appointments for combat-injured Veterans?
A. No. The more Veterans who use VA services, the more funding we receive so we can serve all Veterans. Every Veteran who uses VA services helps secure care for other Veterans.

Need an answer?
Send your health care questions to VAPHSEditor@va.gov or call 412-822-3479.
GET THE JUMP ON THE FLU
Eligible Veterans: Ask for your free flu shot during any scheduled appointment; at our walk-in clinics 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays (University Drive lobby or H.J. Heinz building 71); in the Emergency Department after hours and weekends; or through your local VA outpatient clinic. Details: 1-866-482-7488, then press 4.

Don’t Miss a Thing!

Prescription Copays Reduced
In case you missed it, prescription copays for outpatient medications now fall into one of three tiers ranging from $5 to $11 for a 30-day supply.
The new rates lower outpatient-medication costs for most Veterans. Copays do not apply to former prisoners of war, catastrophically disabled Veterans or those covered by other exceptions.

Hep C. Get Tested. Get Treated.
Veterans have high rates of hepatitis C. We have medications to cure the virus in as little as 12 weeks!
Call our Hep C Team at 412-360-1232 for testing and treatment.
Watch for details in our regional ads this fall!

Go Paperless with Direct Express
Want fast, safe, convenient and reliable travel payments?
Eliminate paper checks – visit any VA Agent Cashier to sign up for the Direct Express debit card.
Money is automatically deposited to your card within 2 to 3 business days after your reimbursement request is received. Use it anywhere debit cards are accepted.