



GASTROINTESTINAL HEALTH

Areas of focus for VA research on gastrointestinal health include research on stomach ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, gastroesophageal reflux disease, and more. VA researchers are looking for potential drug therapies, exploring less invasive treatments, and seeking supportive strategies for Veterans during and after treatment.

EXAMPLES OF VA RESEARCH ADVANCES

STRESS REDUCTION HELPS IBS SUFFERERS—An eight-week course on mindfulness-based stress reduction helped Veterans reduce much of the mental stress associated with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). The course is offered at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System as an adjunct to usual care for Veterans with a variety of health conditions. A formal study of the program's impact on IBS found no short-term effect on symptoms, but definite effects on quality of life and the ability to manage stress. Prior research shows that more than 90 percent of participants who take the course are still using at least one of the techniques four years later.

LESS-INVASIVE SURGERY JUST AS GOOD FOR COLON CANCER—Veterans who have laparoscopic surgery for colon cancer recover faster with no increased risk of the cancer returning, say researchers who analyzed data from the Houston VA Medical Center. Patients who had the less invasive surgery had shorter hospital stays, shorter duration of surgery, and less blood loss. Their bowel function returned sooner after surgery compared with patients who had traditional open surgery, and they were less likely to have post-surgery complications. The study found no differences in overall survival or cancer recurrence.

WIRELESS "PILL" CONFIRMS INTESTINAL CHANGES AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY—The SmartPill is a capsule-based technology that a patient swallows. As it moves through the digestive system, the SmartPill collects information about acidity, temperature, and pressure. It transmits the data wirelessly to a transmitter. Using the data, physicians can determine how long it takes food to pass out of the stomach, small intestine, and colon. A VA team from the Bronx, N.Y., tested the technology in people with spinal cord injury (SCI), which can result in constipation, gastroesophageal reflux disease, and other gastrointestinal complications. Food took an average of 10.6 hours to empty from the stomach in people with SCI, compared with 3.5 hours in people without SCI. Colon emptying times also were much longer in people with SCI: about 52 hours versus 14 hours.

- ★ **FACTS ABOUT GASTROINTESTINAL HEALTH**—*Gastrointestinal disorders affect people of all ages. More than one million Americans suffer from inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), a term that includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. The specific causes of IBD are not known, though cigarette smoking is a known risk factor. IBD is more common in whites and in younger people—most people are diagnosed before age 30. Even more common is frequent heartburn, or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). About 1 in 10 Americans experiences GERD symptoms at least once a week. Smoking and obesity may contribute to GERD symptoms, and many foods—particularly fatty, fried, citrus, and tomato-based foods, as well as chocolate and caffeine—can spur symptoms or make them worse.*