



Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

VA's Office of Research and Development supports numerous studies aimed at understanding, treating, and preventing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These studies range from investigations of the genetic or biochemical underpinnings of the disease to evaluations of new or existing treatments, including large multisite clinical trials. A VA study published in 2007 found that of 103,788 Veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom who were seen at VA facilities between 2001 and 2005, some 13 percent had received a diagnosis of PTSD.



Examples of VA Research Advances

PTSD studied as part of informatics project – As part of a larger VA project that is using a technology called “natural language processing” to enable researchers, clinicians, and managers to make better use of free text in electronic medical records, one study is focusing on PTSD. The goal is to examine whether free text—such as notes entered by doctors, nurses or other clinicians—can shed light on how the disorder progresses and how symptoms may vary from one patient to the next.

PTSD and dementia risk – A VA review study found mixed results in past research looking at ties between PTSD and specific physical illnesses. Data conflicted in studies on PTSD in connection with diabetes, coronary heart disease and stroke. The findings were slightly more consistent with regard to arthritis and digestive disorders. The authors expressed surprise at the sparsity of medical literature on this topic and emphasized the need for large epidemiological trials that track patients over several years.

Risperidone being tested – VA investigators are conducting a clinical trial of the drug risperidone. The trial involves 400 Veterans with chronic PTSD who have not responded to antidepressants, which are considered the first-line drugs for PTSD treatment. Aside from antidepressants, risperidone is seen as the drug with the strongest scientific evidence backing its use in PTSD.

Facts About PTSD

PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can affect people who have experienced life-threatening events, such as combat, a terrorist attack, or a personal assault. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, depression, and social withdrawal, as well as physical health changes. Treatment often includes anti-anxiety drugs or other medication along with psychotherapy. Current evidence-based psychological treatments for PTSD include prolonged-exposure therapy, in which patients recall their traumas in a safe setting and gradually learn to adjust their emotional response; and cognitive-processing therapy, a systematic 12-session program that helps patients release the negative emotions linked to the trauma.

