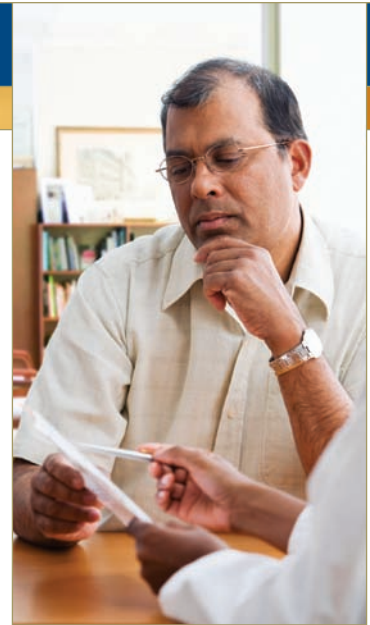




Pain Management

VA is working to develop new approaches to alleviate Veterans' pain, which may result from spinal cord injury, burns, amputations, traumatic brain injury, cancer, arthritis, or any number of other conditions. VA's research portfolio in this area covers a remarkably wide range of topics, from drug discovery to alternative treatments such as yoga or massage. VA investigators are also leaders in studying the impact of pain on daily function and quality of life.



Examples of VA Research Advances

Transcranial magnetic stimulation – A team with VA and the University of California, San Diego, analyzed data from past studies on the use of transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to treat nerve pain. The treatment, developed in Europe in the 1980s and used mainly for mental conditions, was approved last year in the U.S. to treat depression. It has also been tested in a small number of clinical trials as a pain treatment. Looking at data on 149 patients, the VA study found that TMS was most effective when pain originated in the trigeminal nerve, which is linked to facial pain. In these cases, the therapy helped about a third of patients. It helped about 15 percent of patients with pain related to spinal cord injury, and only 1.5 percent of those with peripheral nerve pain.

Assessing pain in primary care – Researchers with VA's Center on Implementing Evidence-Based Practice in Indianapolis have developed a brief three-point measure that asks patients about pain intensity and the degree to which pain interferes with their enjoyment of life and general activity. The researchers say the new tool elicits better information than single-item pain screenings—such as those that simply ask patients to rate their pain on a scale—but is still practical for primary care.

Safer prescribing of opioids – Researchers at the VA Northern California Health Care System are evaluating the Prescription Opioid Documentation and Surveillance System, an informatics tool aimed at improving patient care, refining pain control, and reducing the risk of opioid abuse.

Facts About Pain

Pain is one of the most common reasons people consult a physician and is cited as the most common symptom in service members returning from combat. Research suggests that a quarter of returning Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans report chronic pain that interferes with their daily activities—among the most common types, back pain from the weight of body armor and equipment and pain from traumatic nerve injury. In the belief that no patient should suffer preventable pain, VA requires its doctors and nurses to treat pain as “a fifth vital sign,” to be assessed and recorded along with blood pressure, pulse, temperature, and breathing rate.

