



Substance Abuse

A leader in the field of addiction research for decades, VA Research continues to support a broad portfolio examining substance-abuse prevention, screening, and treatment, including studies aimed at understanding the genetic factors that may predispose people to alcohol or drug abuse and addiction. One area of particular focus is improving substance-abuse treatment for homeless Veterans.

Examples of VA Research Advances

Alcohol use linked to fractures – A team at VA’s Center for Health Care Evaluation, in Palo Alto, studied the records of 32,622 VA outpatients and found that those who scored higher on an alcohol-use screening tool known as the AUDIT-C—indicating problem drinking—were more likely to subsequently break a bone. The researchers suggest that providers use the evidence as part of the counseling they give to patients who screen positive for alcohol problems, informing them that they may be putting themselves at greater risk for fractures, among other health issues.

‘Dual diagnosis’ and treatment outcomes – Researchers with the Center for Health Care Evaluation looked at the benefits of residential substance-abuse treatment for patients with a dual diagnosis—that is, substance abuse plus psychiatric problems. They found that dual-diagnosis patients perceived treatment more negatively than did those with only substance abuse issues and had worse outcomes at discharge. Substance-abuse outcomes evened out for the two groups over five years, although the mental-health problems of the dual-diagnosis patients persisted.

Access to care for homeless Veterans – VA’s Northeast Program Evaluation Center tested a clinic that combined homeless, primary-care and mental-health services for homeless Veterans with mental illness or substance abuse disorders. Compared with similar patients in “usual care,” those using the clinic had more primary-care and preventive services and fewer emergency room visits. Physical health status and hospital use, however, were similar between the two groups.

Facts About Substance Abuse

Substance use disorders—a term that includes alcohol and drug abuse and addiction—have been called the nation’s number one health problem, taking a huge toll on individuals and families and costing the U.S. about \$414 billion each year. During fiscal year 2007, more than 375,000 Veterans received care in VA for substance use disorders. More than half of these patients also had a psychiatric disorder. In addition to those treated for substance use disorders, nearly 500,000 Veterans received care for nicotine dependence. Moreover, an estimated 1.4 million Veterans smoke tobacco.

