ABOUT CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

• Cardiovascular disease is the number-one killer of Americans, and is the leading cause of hospitalization in the VA health care system. It is also a major cause of disability.

• Cardiovascular disease is particularly important to Veterans because it is associated with a number of other diseases that often affect them. These include diabetes, spinal cord injuries, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

• Although there are many different forms of cardiovascular disease, one of the most common forms is a narrowing or a blocking of the blood vessels that supply blood to the heart. This is called coronary artery disease (CAD), and is the main reason people have heart attacks.

VA RESEARCH ON CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE: OVERVIEW

• A VA study conducted in the 1960s generated the first definitive evidence that treating moderate high blood pressure helps prevent and delay the complications hypertension can bring. These complications can include heart disease, kidney disease, stroke, and CAD.

• VA researchers are developing new treatments for cardiovascular disease and helping to improve existing treatments. They are looking at the genetic and lifestyle causes of the disease and are conducting studies ranging from lab experiments to large clinical trials involving thousands of patients.

• VA is also making Veterans and their families aware of the risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Besides high blood pressure, these include smoking, high cholesterol, obesity, lack of physical activity, and uncontrolled diabetes.

• The department offers a number of evidence-based programs to help Veterans manage these conditions. VA researchers review these programs, evaluate their effectiveness, and make suggestions for improvements.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1960 – Successfully implanted the first cardiac pacemaker, a device developed by a VA team

1970 – Published the results of a landmark VA cooperative study on hypertension, showing that treating moderate high blood pressure prevented or delayed catastrophic health complications

1996 – Developed clinical practice guidelines on cholesterol screening for the American College of Physicians

2007 – Learned that balloon angioplasty and stenting do little to improve outcomes for patients with stable coronary artery disease who also receive optimal drug therapy and undergo lifestyle changes

2015 – Participated in the Systolic Blood Pressure Intervention Trial (SPRINT) trial, which found that significantly lowered systolic blood pressure reduces the rate of heart and kidney diseases, stroke, and age-related declines in people over 65

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Patients who were assigned to reach a systolic blood pressure goal below 120, far lower than current guidelines of 140 (or 150 for people over 60), had their risks of heart attacks, heart failure, and strokes reduced by a third, and their risk of death reduced by a quarter, according
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