



## VA research on **CAREGIVERS**

*Providing quality care to America's Veterans doesn't end with the Veteran himself or herself. It extends to the family member or loved one who tends to the everyday needs of a disabled, chronically ill, or aging Veteran: the caregiver.*

### **ABOUT CAREGIVERS**

- Increasingly, America is becoming a nation of caregivers. According to a 2015 report from AARP, an estimated 43.5 million adults in the United States provided unpaid care to an adult or a child in the prior 12 months.
- Whether supervising a spouse to help keep him or her from wandering, assisting with activities of daily living, helping to develop and implement treatment plans, or managing a loved one's behavioral symptoms, caregivers face multiple demands on their time and emotional and physical energy, and as a result may be at risk for becoming anxious, depressed, or susceptible to chronic illness themselves.
- In 2010, legislation authorized VA to establish a wide range of new services to support certain caregivers of eligible Veterans who served after Sept. 11, 2001. These caregivers are now entitled to access to a toll-free caregiver support line (1-855-260-3274), expanded education and training on caring for Veterans at home, and other support services such as counseling and support groups.
- VA facilities also offer programs including in-home care; specialized education and training; respite care; equipment, home,

and automobile modification; and financial assistance for eligible Veterans. Every VA medical center has a caregiver support coordinator to help link up caregivers and Veterans with available VA and non-VA support resources.

### **VA RESEARCH ON CAREGIVERS: OVERVIEW**

- VA experts are developing and refining questionnaires and survey tools, as well as cross-cutting strategies that can be used to implement and test programs across a wide variety of caregiving situations.
- Several VA studies are looking at the impact of caregiver education and stress-reduction programs on the health and wellness of both the Veteran and the caregiver. Other studies are focusing on both the short and long-term needs of caregivers, as many of these individuals will be providing care for years or even decades.
- VA investigators are continuing to improve their understanding of the care caregivers provide and the support they need. They also are learning how caregiving has affected the caregiver, the Veteran receiving care, and the Veteran's entire family.

### **SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS**

- 2007** – Introduced the [Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiver Health](#) (REACH VA) program to reduce stress on caregivers for Veterans with Alzheimer's disease
- 2009** – Developed the VA [Family Care map](#), to ensure family members are fully involved in the care of Veterans with polytrauma
- 2010** – Completed VA's [Family and Caregiver Experience](#) (FACES) study, which provided significant information on who provides care to seriously injured Veterans, what kinds of services and support they provide, and what help they need
- 2013** – [Determined](#) that in families using a VA-developed home safety toolkit, there was less caregiver strain, better home safety, and fewer accidents and risky behaviors among those with Alzheimer's
- 2015** – [Found](#) that the blame and anger associated with the grief of caring for a loved one with a traumatic brain injury (TBI) may be related to inflammation and certain chronic diseases including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes

*(Continued on back)*



**RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS**

**• According to VA’s FACES study, 79 percent of caregivers for Veterans with multiple injuries (polytraumas) are women,**

usually the Veteran’s parent or spouse. Even as long as four years after their injury, 22 percent of Veterans with polytraumas supported by caregivers still need help with basic activities and daily living such as bathing, feeding, and toileting. An additional 48 percent need help with tasks such as shopping, driving, and money management, according to Minneapolis VA researchers. (*Family and Caregiver Experience Study*)

**• Financial strain is common for caregivers.** Among caregivers of Veterans with polytrauma, 62 percent reported to Minneapolis VA researchers that their assets had been depleted and 41 percent reported having to leave the labor force. These figures are much higher than those for other caregivers internationally. (*Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation*, January-February 2012)

**• A safety toolkit that provides research-based recommendations for home safety has been created** by researchers at the Bedford, Mass., VA hospital and Boston University. Families

who used the 25-page, illustrated, simple-language guide to help them care for Veterans with Alzheimer’s disease had less caregiver strain, better home safety, and fewer accidents and risky behaviors than families whose loved one received usual care. (*International Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease*, 2013)

**• Caregivers who have not been trained on how to navigate health care systems have higher levels of depression,** feel more burdened by their responsibilities, and have lower self-esteem than those who had been trained in this skill. Researchers at the Richmond and Minneapolis VA Medical Centers also found caregivers who had not been trained in how to support the emotions of their care recipients now have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and care burden, and lower self-esteem than those who received such training. (*Behavioral Neurology*, 2015)

**• Systematized feedback to caregivers could alleviate their burden and help them avoid burnout and mental health concerns.** In a study by researchers from the Ann Arbor VA and the University of Michigan involving 369 Veterans with heart failure, those caregivers who

received feedback about their loved one reported less caregiver strain and depression than in the control group. They also reported they had spent more time with their patients, including greater attendance at doctors’ appointments; increased involvement in patient medication adherence; and more time spent in supportive care. (*Medical Care*, August 2015)

**• Blame and anger associated with the grief of caring for a loved one with a TBI may be related to inflammation and certain chronic diseases,** including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. A study by researchers at the Hines, Ill., VA hospital and Loyola University of Chicago found these caregivers collectively reported levels of grief comparable to that of individuals who have lost a loved one. Inflammatory-related health issues may be an important indicator of which caregivers may be at risk for developing chronic problems such as heart disease. (*Biological Research for Nursing*, January 2016)

**For more information on VA studies on caregivers and other key topics relating to Veterans’ health, please visit [www.research.va.gov/topics](http://www.research.va.gov/topics)**

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*VA experts are developing and evaluating programs and interventions across a wide range of caregiving situations.*

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