ABOUT DEPRESSION

• According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), major depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States, and it carries the heaviest burden of disability among mental and behavioral disorders. In 2014, NIMH estimated that some 15.7 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States had at least one major depressive episode in the past year—6.7 percent of all U.S. adults.

• Most experts believe a combination of genes and stressful life events can cause depression. Health problems such as anemia or an underactive thyroid gland can also lead to depression, as can certain medicines, such as steroids or narcotics.

• In 2008, VA estimated that about 1 in 3 Veterans visiting primary care clinics has some symptoms of depression; 1 in 5 has serious symptoms that suggest the need for further evaluation for major depression; and 1 in 8 to 10 has major depression, requiring treatment with psychotherapy or antidepressants.

VA RESEARCH ON DEPRESSION: OVERVIEW

• VA researchers are making important headway in treating, screening, and diagnosing depression and other mood disorders such as bipolar disorder, persistent despondency, and seasonal affective disorder.

• Researchers are developing models of family interventions and social support to help Veterans recover from mood disorders, learning which risk factors make a person more likely to suffer from depression or to respond positively to a specific medication, and identifying and testing potential new drugs for depression and other disorders.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

2006 – Developed, through VA’s TIDES project, an evidence-based collaborative approach to depression management

2006 – Began the Heart and Soul Study, on how psychological factors influence the outcomes of patients with coronary heart disease

2008 – Demonstrated that the link between depression and heart disease may hinge largely on behavioral factors associated with depression, such as lack of exercise and increased smoking

2012 – Found that serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) may be more effective in treating depression symptoms than drugs that affect only serotonin (SSRIs)

2015 – Learned that talk therapy delivered by two-way video calls is at least as effective as in-person treatment delivery for older Veterans with depression

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Veterans with depression are more likely to complain of increased chest pain related to ischemic heart disease. Ischemic heart disease, also known as coronary artery disease, is the term given to heart problems caused by narrowed heart arteries. Researchers at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System found that changes in depression symptoms could affect the perception of a patient’s chest pain, or angina. The greater the perception of chest pain, regardless of the actual extent of the disease, the greater the likelihood of cardiac intervention. (Annals of Behavioral Medicine, February 2015)

• Veterans with depression, PTSD, and traumatic brain injury have the greatest level of difficulty in getting around, communicating and getting along with others, self-care, and other daily tasks, according to researchers at VA’s Translational Research Center for...
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