ABOUT GASTROINTESTINAL HEALTH

• Gastrointestinal problems are among the illnesses reported by many Gulf War Veterans. These problems include irritable bowel syndrome, which is marked by chronic cramping, bloating, and diarrhea.

• More than 1 million Americans have inflammatory bowel disease, which includes Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis. Crohn’s disease affects the entire gastrointestinal tract, while ulcerative colitis is limited to the colon.

• Frequent heartburn, or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), is a common gastrointestinal issue. About one in 10 Americans experiences GERD symptoms at least once a week.

• Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in the United States.

VA RESEARCH ON GASTROINTESTINAL HEALTH: OVERVIEW

• VA researchers are exploring new techniques to treat Clostridium difficile (C. difficile) infections, such as doses of non-toxic C. difficile spores and fecal transplantation. C. difficile is often resistant to standard treatments such as antibiotics.

• Researchers from three VA sites developed new guidelines for screening and managing precancerous cells that could develop into colon cancer in patients with inflammatory bowel disease.

• VA has made it a priority to screen its patients aged 50 years or older for colon cancer. Evidence from the American Cancer Society suggests that screening efforts have helped lower the number of deaths from colon cancer in recent years.

• VA researchers are looking for potential drug therapies to help Veterans with gastrointestinal problems such as stomach ulcers, C. difficile infections, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, colon cancer, and GERD. They are also exploring less invasive treatments and seeking supportive strategies for Veterans during and after treatment.

2004 – Found that the open technique is superior to the laparoscopic technique for mesh repair of primary hernias

2013 – Learned that treatment with the drug infliximab and an immunomodulator significantly reduces the risk of hospitalization and surgery

2013 – Determined that weight is not a factor in whether proton-pump inhibitors can successfully treat gastroesophageal reflux disease

2015 – Found that giving spores of non-toxic C. difficile by mouth can stop repeated bouts of infection

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Giving spores of non-toxic C. difficile by mouth can stop repeated bouts of C. difficile infection, found an international team of researchers led by Dr. Dale Gerding of the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital. C. difficile is an intestinal bacterial infection that is often difficult to treat and frequently reoccurs. (Journal of the American Medical Association, May 5, 2015)

• A procedure called fecal transplantation, which may date back thousands of years, can effectively battle C. difficile infections, according to a systematic review by VA and University of

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VA researchers are looking for potential drug therapies to help Veterans with gastrointestinal problems, exploring less invasive treatments, and seeking supportive strategies for Veterans during and after treatment.