ABOUT OBESITY

• Obesity results from a combination of causes and contributing factors, including individual factors such as behavior and genetics.

• Behaviors contributing to obesity can include dietary patterns, physical activity or inactivity, medication use, and exposures to various environmental factors. Additional contributing factors in American society include the food and physical activity environment, education and skills, and food marketing and promotion.

• Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease, type 2 diabetes (once known as adult-onset or noninsulin-dependent diabetes), stroke, and some types of cancer. In particular, diabetes and obesity have become a very prevalent combination.

• In 2013, VA estimated that more than 165,000 Veterans who receive their health care from the department have a body mass index (BMI) of more than 40, which indicates a serious condition called morbid obesity. Morbid obesity can interfere with basic physical functions and significantly increase the risk of obesity-related conditions.

VA RESEARCH ON OBESITY: OVERVIEW

• VA research on obesity looks at the biological processes of weight gain and weight loss. Researchers compare the safety and effectiveness of obesity treatments, and work to find ways to help Veterans keep from gaining weight—for example, through exercise and healthy eating.

• VA researchers work hand in hand with the department’s MOVE! program, a national weight-management and exercise initiative designed and coordinated by VA’s National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

2002 – Reported key findings on ghrelin, a “hunger hormone” that was first discovered in 1999

2006 – Implemented VA MOVE! program nationally, providing overweight Veterans with the largest and most comprehensive weight management program associated with a U.S. medical care program

2013 – Found that Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans with PTSD and depression are at the greatest risk of obesity and not being able to lose weight, relative to all those who served in the two countries between 2001 and 2010

2015 – Learned that bariatric surgery helps overweight patients live longer

2016 – Found that as fat cells develop, they change the types of nutrients they metabolize to produce fat and energy—an important step towards finding new ways to treat both diabetes and obesity

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Many health care providers have strong negative attitudes and stereotypes about people with obesity—and these attitudes influence their perceptions, judgment, interpersonal behavior, and decision-making. A team of researchers with VA’s Center for Chronic Disease Outcomes Research also found that these biases were more negative than those exhibited toward racial minorities, gays, lesbians, and poor people. The researchers believe that doctors should discuss weight issues with obese patients, but should do so in a less judgmental, more affirming way—making the discussion about feeling good, not about a number on a scale. (Obesity, April 2014; Obesity Reviews, April 2015)

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