ABOUT PAIN MANAGEMENT

- Nearly 40 million American adults experience severe pain, and an estimated 25.3 million had pain every day over a three-month period, an NIH study found.

- Chronic pain can cause disability, loss of productivity, and increased health care costs.

- Unrelieved and persistent chronic pain contributes to depression, anxiety, poor sleep patterns, decreased quality of life, and substance use disorders.

- Medication is the most common treatment for both acute and chronic pain. For patients interested in treatments other than or in addition to medication, complementary and integrative medicine—such as acupuncture and yoga—is a popular option.

VA RESEARCH ON PAIN MANAGEMENT: OVERVIEW

- VA researchers are working to develop new approaches to alleviate Veterans’ pain, which may result from spinal cord injury, burns, amputations, traumatic brain injury, cancer, or musculoskeletal conditions. Some types of chronic pain, such as the nerve pain experienced by many people with spinal cord injury, are very difficult to treat. VA research on pain covers a wide range of topics, such as drug discovery and the impact of pain on daily function and quality of life.

- The Center for Neuroscience and Regeneration Research, a collaboration between VA and its partners, conducts biomedical research that contributes to the scientific understanding of pain, especially nerve pain. The center is dedicated to molecular and cell-based discoveries on nervous system function.

- VA’s Pain, Research, Informatics, Medical Comorbidities, and Education (PRIME) Center, part of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System, conducts research to improve pain care and sponsors education activities for Veterans and clinical staff.

- The Chronic Pain Rehabilitation Program at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa, Fla., is a nationally known center for chronic pain research, treatment, and education. The CPRP offers inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation programs to help Veterans manage their chronic pain conditions.

- The Pain Management and Patient Aligned Care CREATE has three goals: to enhance Veterans’ access to pain care, to use health information technology to promote better pain care for Veterans, and to build sustainable improvements in pain care.

- VA’s Stepped Care Model for Pain Management gives clinicians the ability to assess and treat pain within a primary care setting, while enabling them to use other treatment options including specialized care and multidisciplinary approaches. The model is designed to ensure VA clinicians are fully trained in pain management techniques, that pain assessment is performed consistently throughout VA, and that Veterans receive prompt and appropriate treatment.

- VA researchers are working to better understand chronic low back pain in older adults through a series of papers and an NIH task force. As many as 40 percent of Veterans over 65 years old have chronic back pain.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1988 – Established a chronic pain rehabilitation program in Tampa, Fla., to help Veterans with chronic pain cope with their conditions

1988 – Distributed the first national pain management strategy, which established pain management as a national VA priority

2003 – Mandated, in a VA directive, that all patients be systematically screened for the presence and intensity of pain

(Continued on back)
2009 – Established the stepped care model for pain management as VA’s nationwide standard of pain care

2014 – Announced, along with NIH, a five-year, $21.7 million quality-improvement initiative to explore non-drug approaches to managing pain and related health conditions

2015 – Found that ion channels—specialized proteins in the membrane of brain cells—are heavily implicated in the biological mechanisms that generate and sustain neuropathic pain

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Patients on higher opioid doses are at greater risk of suicide than those on lower doses, according to researchers in the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System and their colleagues. Providers may want to view high opioid dose as a marker of elevated suicide risk, suggest the researchers. (Pain, Jan. 5, 2016)

• Researchers in the Southeast Louisiana VA Health Care System and their colleagues developed new pain medications called endomorphin analogs. This type of medication produced fewer and less dangerous side effects than pain medications such as morphine in an animal study. The promising findings, though preliminary, suggest that endomorphin analogs may reduce the instances of abuse, respiratory depression, motor impairment, tolerance, and glial activation in patients with acute and chronic pain. (Neuropharmacology, Dec. 31, 2015)

• Repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation decreases persistent daily headache pain in Veterans with mild traumatic brain injury. A study at the VA San Diego Healthcare System found that transcranial magnetic stimulation resulted in more than 50 percent headache intensity reduction one week after treatment. Headache is one of the most common chronic pain conditions in active duty personnel and Veterans with mild traumatic brain injury. (Neuromodulation, Nov. 10, 2015)

• In a pilot study, researchers at the Durham VA Medical Center and Duke Integrative Medicine Clinic found that Swedish massage is feasible and effective for reducing pain caused by knee osteoarthritis. If these results are confirmed by a larger study, massage could become an important part of regular care for pain. (Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, June 2, 2015)

• A panel led by VA researchers developed an algorithm and supportive materials to guide the care of older adults with hip osteoarthritis, an important contributor to chronic lower back pain. The report was the first in a series designed to examine the multiple causes of lower back pain in older adults. (Pain Medicine, May 1, 2015)

• Implementation of the Opioid Safety Initiative in the Minneapolis VA Health Care System led to a significant reduction in high-dose opioid prescribing. Setting dosing limits and establishing patient assessment and treatment guidelines improved the quality and consistency of prescription practices, say the researchers. (Pain Medicine, May 1, 2015)

For more information on VA studies on pain management and other key topics relating to Veterans’ health, please visit www.research.va.gov/topics

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