



VA research on **SUICIDE PREVENTION**

Recent data suggest that more than 7,500 Veterans die by suicide each year. Veterans make up about 18 percent of those who die by suicide in the United States.

ABOUT SUICIDE PREVENTION

- Veterans can be at risk for suicide for a variety of reasons. Some are coping with aging, stress, or lingering effects stemming from their military service that have never been addressed. Many have underlying mental health conditions or substance use disorders, in some cases aggravated by their military service, that increase their risk. Many recently discharged Veterans have difficulty with their relationships or their transition back to civilian life.
- As part of its efforts to address this problem, VA has established a toll-free, confidential Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255 (1-800-273-TALK)**. The hotline, staffed by mental health professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week, has [received](#) more than 3 million calls (as of September 2017) since it was established in 2007. VA also offers a texting service at #838255.
- Veterans and their families can chat online with trained counselors at www.VeteransCrisisLine.net. Registration with VA or enrollment in VA health care is not necessary. VA also has full-time suicide prevention coordinators at each of its 145 hospitals.

VA RESEARCH ON SUICIDE PREVENTION: OVERVIEW

- Times of crisis can be related to chronic pain, anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, or anger, or disturbing memories of combat service. VA researchers are taking steps to protect at-risk Veterans from contemplating, attempting, and completing the act of suicide.
- Investigators are exploring risk factors for suicide in Veterans and helping to improve risk assessments. They are also working to develop effective interventions and to identify crucial time periods at which to intervene.
- Other researchers are developing national systems to capture and manage data relating to suicide, attempted suicide, and suicide reattempts among Veterans. These systems will help investigators determine risk and protective factors for suicidal behavior among Veterans.
- VA's Center of [Excellence for Suicide Prevention](#), located at the Canandaigua, N.Y., VA Medical Center, has a mission to reduce occurrences of suicide, primarily by studying and applying public health approaches to suicide prevention.

- VA's [Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center](#) studies suicide with the goal of reducing suicide in the Veteran population.
- VA is part of the [Military Suicide Research Consortium](#), a partnership that manages studies to increase knowledge on topics such as risk assessment, treatment, and prevention, as they pertain to suicidal behavior in the military and among Veterans.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

- 2007** – Established a [Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention](#) in Canandaigua, N.Y.
- 2012** – Completed a [report](#) providing data on suicides and attempted suicides among Veterans
- 2012** – [Found](#) that the experience of killing in war was strongly associated with thoughts of suicide
- 2016** – [Determined](#) that Veterans receiving high doses of opioid painkillers were more than twice as likely to die by suicide than those receiving low doses
- 2016** – [Announced](#) a series of actions to reduce Veteran suicide, including using data on suicide attempts and overdoses to guide prevention strategies

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2016 - Launched the [REACH VET](#) program, which analyzes existing data to identify Veterans at a statistically elevated risk for suicide and allows VA to provide them with pre-emptive care and support

2017 - [Found](#) that, after adjusting for differences in age and sex, risk for suicide was 22 percent higher among Veterans when compared to U.S. non-Veteran adults

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

PTSD symptom severity is linked to higher suicide risk, according to a Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System study. The research shows that anxiety sensitivity, the fear of anxiety sensations and behaviors separate from the actual experience of anxiety, could explain this link. Although the relationship between PTSD and suicide is well known, the research adds to the understanding of the underlying causes at play. ([Journal of Affective Disorders](#), November 2017)

Soldiers have a higher risk of suicide if other suicide attempts have occurred in their unit. Researcher with the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers found that soldiers were more likely to attempt suicide if at least one suicide attempt occurred in their unit in the

past year, with the odds increasing as the number of suicide attempts in the unit increased. Soldiers in units with five or more attempts were more than twice as likely to attempt suicide as soldiers in units without an attempt. The effect was more pronounced for smaller units. ([JAMA Psychiatry](#), Sep. 1, 2017)

Treating PTSD symptoms with prolonged exposure therapy can be an effective way to reduce suicidal ideation, found a study at three VA medical centers. Results showed that, as PTSD symptoms decreased, suicidal ideation also decreased. The researchers believe that evidence-based treatment such as prolonged exposure therapy for specific disorders could be an effective component of suicide outreach. ([Journal of Psychiatric Research](#), September 2016)

Veterans with lower total cholesterol may have higher risk of suicide, found a Coatesville VA Medical Center study. Veterans with total cholesterol levels below 168 mg/dL appeared to have a higher suicide risk than those with higher levels. Veterans in the study who had suicidal thoughts or attempts showed a 20 percent decrease in cholesterol levels from earlier doctor's visits when they were not suicidal. A lower cholesterol level may alter the microviscosity of the brain-cell membrane, reducing serotonin receptor exposure. ([Research in Nursing & Health](#),

August 2017)

Veterans with TBI were 25 percent more likely to attempt suicide than those without, in a VA Boston Healthcare System study. The study looked at 273,591 Veterans deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan between 2007 and 2012. Eighty-three percent of Vets with TBI who attempted suicide also had psychiatric conditions such as PTSD, suggesting that these conditions are an important mechanism through which TBI influences suicidal behavior. ([American Journal of Epidemiology](#), July 15, 2017)

An analysis of data from nearly 5 million Veterans showed that substance use disorder significantly increases suicide risk. The study, conducted by researchers with the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, also found that substance use disorder raises the risk of suicide more in women than in men. Male Veterans had between a 1.35 and 4.74 times higher suicide risk than those without a substance use disorder, depending on the type of drug. Women Veterans had between a 3.89 and 11.36 times higher suicide risk. ([Addiction](#), July 2017)

For more information on VA studies on suicide prevention and other key topics relating to Veterans' health, please visit www.research.va.gov/topics

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