VA research on
COMPLEMENTARY AND INTEGRATIVE HEALTH (CIH)

Complementary and integrative health generally consists of products and practices that are not currently part of “mainstream” medicine. The field emphasizes patient empowerment, preventive self-care, and wellness, in place of a reliance on medical treatment and intervention.

ABOUT CIH

• More than 30 percent of American adults and about 12 percent of children use health care approaches developed outside of mainstream conventional medicine, according to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.
• Complementary health is used along with standard medical care, while alternative medicine is used in place of standard care. Integrative health refers to care that blends both mainstream and alternative practices.
• Most complementary health approaches fall into one of two subgroups: natural products, which include herbs, vitamins and minerals, and probiotics; and mind and body practices such as yoga, meditation, massage therapy, acupuncture, and relaxation techniques.
• In VA, CIH techniques are most commonly used to help Veterans manage stress, or to promote wellness.
• CIH is often used to treat PTSD, depression, back pain, headache, arthritis, fibromyalgia (which involves chronic pain and fatigue throughout the body), and substance abuse.

VA RESEARCH ON CIH: OVERVIEW

• Many CIH practices have not been rigorously tested in formal research. VA researchers are conducting studies to determine which therapies are safe and effective, and for which conditions and populations they work best.
• VA has conducted several studies on integrative mental health treatments. They address topics such as meditation to treat PTSD and other mental health conditions; vitamin E to delay the decline of cognitive functioning in Alzheimer’s disease; and transcranial magnetic stimulation to treat depression, migraines, and tinnitus.
• VA researchers are exploring integrative cancer treatments such as extract from magnolia tree bark, antioxidants in fruits, and compounds in the spice turmeric. These natural compounds show potential to block cancer growth.
• Other complementary and integrative approaches being explored by VA include exercise for physical and mental health, maggot therapy to clean wounds, and fecal transplants to resolve C. difficile infections.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

2006 – Learned that glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate, taken either alone or in combination, do not reduce pain effectively in patients with osteoarthritis of the knee

2011 – Reported that 90 percent of VA facilities offered complementary or integrative medicine therapies, or referred Veterans to licensed practitioners

2014 – Found that Vitamin E, an inexpensive treatment, can significantly delay functional decline among patients with mild to moderate Alzheimer’s disease

2015 – Learned that mindfulness therapy may be more effective than standard group therapy in treating PTSD

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• Veterans who used “mantram” meditation had improved outcomes for anxiety, depression, and somatization (psychological distress expressed through physical symptoms), according to a study at six VA sites. Mantram meditation involves silently repeating a word or

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