ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Substance use and misuse, with its associated health consequences, is a major public health problem. SUDs include dependencies on alcohol, illicit and prescription drugs, and nicotine. SUDs have substantial negative consequences on Veterans’ mental and physical health, work performance, housing status, and social function.

SUDs can develop in individuals who use alcohol or other addicting drugs in harmful quantities. According to the VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Substance Use Disorders, about 9 percent of Americans over age 18 have a non-tobacco SUD, and about 1 in 4 Americans will develop a non-tobacco SUD over the course of a lifetime. Excessive alcohol use alone leads to about 88,000 premature deaths each year.

In service members and Veterans, SUD commonly co-occurs with and complicates other conditions or issues. These conditions or issues may be health-related, such as other mental health conditions. They may also be societal, such as homelessness, criminal justice involvement, or unemployment.

VA RESEARCH ON SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS: OVERVIEW

VA researchers are looking at treatment-seeking patterns: why and when Veterans ask for help—and why many don’t. Treatment strategies, including cognitive behavioral strategies and web-based approaches, are also being studied.

Other researchers are working to identify the most effective therapies for comorbid disorders, such as depression and PTSD, and attempting to determine whether early intervention improves outcomes. Still others are focusing on how readjustment issues relate to substance abuse.

VA is highly engaged in collaborative activities with other federal research agencies—including the departments of Health and Human Services and Defense—especially focused on research that could lead to advances in reducing SUD in Veterans and related to managing opioid use.

A Collaborative Research to Enhance and Advance Transformation and Excellence (CREATE) group is working to promote value and access in VA’s SUD services. The group is doing so by validating and refining quality metrics; evaluating and disseminating low-cost, high impact innovations; and promoting patient and provider knowledge about evidence-based treatment for SUDs.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1956 – Linked cigarette smoking with precancerous lesions

1976 – Completed a comparison trial of two different types of methadone

1984 – Developed the nicotine transdermal patch and other therapies to help smokers quit

1992 – Published a study in which the drug Naltrexone was shown to be effective in keeping alcoholics from relapsing into heavy drinking and reduced cravings for alcohol

2013 – Successfully tested a vaccine to treat methamphetamine addiction on mice

2016 – Developed, and tested on rats, a painkiller as strong as morphine that is unlikely to be addictive and has fewer side effects

2017 – VA-DoD-NIH Pain Collaboratory created to fund studies on non-opioid pain treatments

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

Smokers are confused about the benefits of lung cancer screening, according to a VA Seattle-Denver Center of Innovation study. A survey of patients showed that most were mistaken about the benefits of screenings and smoking in general. Patients falsely believed that lung cancer screenings could prevent cancer, and were confused about the health risks...
SUDs have substantial negative consequences on Veterans’ mental and physical health, work performance, housing status, and social function.

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