



OBESITY

VA research on obesity examines the biological mechanisms of weight gain and weight loss, compares the safety and effectiveness of obesity treatments, and aims to identify strategies to prevent weight gain through exercise and healthy eating. These efforts complement VA's "MOVE!" program, a national weight-management and exercise program designed by the VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.

EXAMPLES OF VA RESEARCH ADVANCES

HANDHELD HELP FOR WEIGHT LOSS—Can a personal digital assistant (PDA) help Veterans lose weight? VA researchers are finding out. The study is part of the MOVE! program at the Hines Hospital VA medical center. It will enroll Veterans with a body-mass index between 25 and 40 who have been dealing with chronic pain for at least six months. Half will be given a PDA on which to record food intake, physical activity, weight, mood, and pain intensity. The PDA group also will receive telephone support biweekly for six months. After a year, the researchers will analyze data to see if the PDA helps with weight loss and decreases pain intensity. MOVE! is a national weight-management program designed to help Veterans lose weight and improve their health.

PROBING BENEFITS OF OBESITY SURGERY—A VA study suggested that bariatric surgery, while it does pose certain health benefits for many obese patients, may not significantly reduce mortality, at least not in the few years following surgery. The Durham-based researchers concluded that high-risk Veterans who are considering bariatric surgery “should be counseled by their VA surgeon that bariatric surgery may not impact their survival in the medium term (six to seven years), but that the long-term association with mortality remains unknown.” The authors suggest further studies on longer-term benefits of the surgery, with an eye toward identifying the subsets of patients with obesity for whom the procedure is most beneficial.

OBESITY'S IMPACT ON CAROTID ARTERY OUTCOMES—When the carotid artery—which brings blood to the brain—becomes narrowed or clogged, boosting the risk for a stroke, doctors often recommend a procedure called an endarterectomy, in which they scrape away the plaque that has built up in the artery. A database study at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center and Georgetown University, found that patients with a body mass index of 35 or greater were nearly seven times more likely than non-obese patients to die within 30 days of the procedure, and more than three times more likely to experience cardiac complications. According to the researchers, “Surgeons should consider this when evaluating the risks and benefits of carotid endarterectomy in obese patients.”

★ **FACTS ABOUT OBESITY**—*Obesity has skyrocketed in the past four decades and reached epidemic proportions. More than two-thirds of American adults are considered overweight or obese, and the percentage is slightly higher among Veterans enrolled in the VA health system. This trend has major implications for American health care, since obesity increases the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, and other diseases. Obesity is determined on the basis of a person's body mass index, or BMI, which is calculated by dividing weight in pounds by height in inches squared and multiplied by 703. A BMI of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight, while a BMI of 30 or greater is considered obese.*