

Veterans' Healthy Living

VA New England Healthcare System

Spring 2008

Fit for Life

Allergy Alert

Have You Heard:
Changes in Audiology

Medication Safety



Homocysteine and Heart Disease

Message From the Network Director



Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.
Network Director

Dear Veterans,

Spring is upon us! Traditionally a time of renewal, spring is a good time to take control of your health with a diet and exercise program. Start by visiting your VA primary care provider to ask what would work best for you with your particular health needs, and read on in this issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living* for useful information and tips!

Weight reduction or maintenance is just one of the benefits of a well-managed diet and exercise program. On page 4, you'll learn about the different types of cholesterol, the role they play in heart disease and stroke, and how lifestyle changes will help you control them.

Although regular activity and exercise are important to our health at any age, mobility can become a challenge when we're older. On page 6, read about ways you can safely add regular exercise and activity to your schedule.

When the temperatures get warmer and the days get longer, getting outside for exercise can lift your spirits. But what if you have seasonal allergies? There are ways to cope with the symptoms of spring allergies so that being outdoors is enjoyable. Read our allergy alert on page 3.

Finally, and on a personal note, by the time you read this, I will have retired after 34 years of VA service. It has been my honor and privilege to work with you, the veterans throughout New England who receive health care from us. I leave you in the capable hands of the talented staff of VA New England. Remember, the medical centers and community-based outpatient clinics in VISN 1 are here for you. Turn to us with your health care needs!

Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.
Network Director



My HealtheVet (MHV) is the gateway to veteran health benefits and services.

It provides access to:

- Trusted Health Information**
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Have You Heard?

"We're Helping Veterans Hear!"



Anne Hogan, Au.D

Have you heard? Audiologists in VA New England are helping veterans hear!

Anne Hogan, Au.D, chief of audiology and speech pathology at VA Boston Healthcare System, explains how. "Most veterans," she says, "are sent to us by their primary care physician or an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialist because of difficulty understanding speech, ringing in the ears, balance problems, pain in the ear, or wax buildup. And sometimes the veterans simply realize they aren't hearing well."

A typical evaluation by an audiologist includes tests to determine if hearing loss is present, how it should be treated, and if further evaluation is needed. The audiologist also determines what type of hearing aid is most appropriate based on a veteran's hearing loss, dexterity, and lifestyle.

"Hearing aids are customized," says Hogan. "We use a soft plastic material to create an impression of the ear and send that to a manufacturer who makes the product." After 3–4 weeks, she uses a computer to fit and fine-tune the aid to the patient.

In her 20 years at the VA, Hogan has seen several changes in audiology. "A behind-the-ear (BTE) device used to be all that was available. In the early

1990s, a unit worn in the ear became popular. Now, BTEs use a new technology designed to accommodate a wider range of hearing loss. We still do hearing aids in the ear, but BTEs have made a comeback."

Technology allowed Hogan to help a recent patient whose hearing aid is only four years old. "He has an especially difficult loss, and we now have something to improve his hearing ability that was not available a few years ago. At the other end of the spectrum, we can also help our younger veterans and soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who may have minimal loss."

Hogan believes all veterans—particularly those who have been exposed to loud noises or who have ringing in the ears (tinnitus)—should get a baseline hearing test even if they don't have a problem. "If you are evaluated now and your hearing changes later, we have something to compare it to, which can help determine why it's changed."

See your primary care physician if you have questions or concerns about your hearing.

Allergy Alert:

For more than 35 million Americans, the first sign of spring is a sneeze! Airborne pollen allergy is one of the most common chronic diseases in the United States, but there are things you can do to ease the discomfort caused by an allergy.

If your body overreacts to something that doesn't cause a problem for most people, you could have an allergy. The body's overreaction is what triggers symptoms such as sneezing; a runny or stuffy nose; coughing; postnasal drip; and itchy, watery eyes, nose and throat. A seasonal springtime allergy—often called hay fever—is usually a reaction to the pollen from trees, grass, or weeds.

If you're experiencing your first bout with an allergy, you might think you have a cold. A cold, however, should go away in a week or two. If your symptoms last longer, you should see your VA primary care provider because you could be having an allergic reaction.

Homocysteine and Heart Disease:



The Lower Your Level... The Lower Your Risk!

Vascular disease, which causes stroke, hardening of the arteries, and heart disease, has long been linked to cholesterol levels. But if you have normal cholesterol levels - either because of a healthy lifestyle or a cholesterol-lowering statin drug - don't celebrate your achievement just yet.

According to Dr. Kilmer McCully, chief of pathology and laboratory medicine at VA Boston Healthcare System, another substance could be lurking in your bloodstream that puts you at an increased risk of vascular disease. He should know. He's been studying the subject for nearly 40 years!

"Homocysteine (pronounced hōmō-sīs-tēn) is an amino acid that accumulates in the blood," he explains. "Too much of it can damage the lining of blood vessels and increase the

possibility that blood clots will form in arteries and veins. It puts people of all ages at risk for serious health problems - even

"Your homocysteine level is partly controlled by your diet. By eating fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grains or legumes, and fresh fish and meats, the amount of B vitamins in these foods will keep your homocysteine level in the prime range."

~Dr. Kilmer McCully

if their cholesterol is within the normal range."

McCully's interest in homocysteine began in 1968 at Harvard Medical School.

"I studied two children who died from different causes and found that both had hardening of the arteries. The common link was that each had a high level of homocysteine in the blood. Because folic acid and other B vitamins help break down homocysteine, I wanted to know more about the relationship between this group of vitamins and vascular disease."

Through subsequent career moves that included conducting research at the National Institutes of Health, McCully continued to unravel the mystery.

"By 1975, I had enough evidence to propose that increasing B vitamins and folic acid in the diet could keep homocysteine levels in an acceptable range that might not reverse advanced vascular disease but could help prevent it."

Other studies supported his theory. In the 1950s and 1960s, synthetic vitamin B6 was added to the U.S. food supply in the form of fortification of cereals and supplements. In 1998, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandated that flour and refined grains be fortified with folic acid. The result? A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control shows that since 1999, coronary heart disease and stroke age-related death rates are down by 25.8 percent and 24.4 percent, respectively. When these data are collected for 2008, the decreases in death rates are projected to be a spectacular 36 percent decline in coronary heart disease and 34 percent decline for stroke! While part of that trend may be improvements in lifestyle, health care, and medications, McCully believes much of the decline is related to lowering of blood homocysteine levels in the population by increased folic acid in the food supply, as mandated by the FDA in 1998.

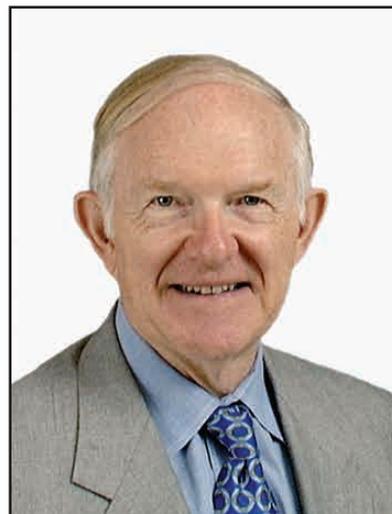
So how can you keep your homocysteine levels low? McCully says the best place to start is at the dinner table.

“Your homocysteine level is partly controlled by your diet.

By eating fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grains or legumes, and fresh fish and meats, the amount of B vitamins in these foods will keep your homocysteine level in the prime range.” He adds that you should avoid processed foods such as white flour, sugars, oils, and other foods that have been canned, milled, or preserved because those processes remove the sensitive vitamin B6 and folic acid from these foods.

Some patients may also need over-the-counter supplemental vitamins, but McCully suggests you discuss that with your primary health care provider. He also cautions that cholesterol is still an important part of your overall health.

“LDL - bad cholesterol - carries homocysteine around in your blood. The more homocysteine in the LDL, the more likely it is to cause damage to the arteries. And a recent study suggests that HDL - good cholesterol - contains an enzyme that degrades homocysteine from an active form to an inactive form. So cholesterol is still involved but may not necessarily be what is damaging the arteries.”



Kilmer McCully, M.D.

Dr. Kilmer McCully is the chief of pathology and laboratory medicine at VA Boston Healthcare System. He is also director of the Boston Area Consolidated Laboratories, and medical director of the Network Consolidated Laboratories in VA New England. After majoring in chemistry and biochemistry at Harvard, he spent years researching genetics, molecular biology, biochemistry, and pathology.

Folic acid, which is a B vitamin, is found in:

Bananas; dark green, leafy vegetables such as asparagus and broccoli; fish; fortified breakfast cereal; liver; nuts and seeds; oranges and grapefruit; peas and lightly cooked beans; poultry; spaghetti; sprouts; whole wheat bread.



Fit for LIFE ★★★★★★

As the body changes with age, decreased mobility can create difficulty with movement when walking, getting up and down, or even driving a car. It is important to be aware of how we can adjust when limitations affect our ability to participate in everyday activities. These adjustments can help to prevent falls, which are a major cause of injury for aging Americans.

To keep up good mobility and prevent health problems, regular physical activity and exercise is essential. Only 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day provide many excellent health benefits. These benefits include improved breathing,

endurance, balance, muscle strength, sleep, and bone strength. This activity can also lower blood pressure and reduce arthritis pain. Physical activity can help you live longer and live better.

But you don't have to join a gym to keep your body in shape. Daily activities such as housecleaning, walking the dog, or gardening are great ways to get your blood pumping. However, be aware of your surroundings if



you are staying active at home; keep your walkways clear of clutter, remove slippery throw rugs, install handrails and grab bars where needed, and make sure your home has plenty of lighting.

If you are not sure where to begin, make an appointment to visit a VA clinic to consult with a health care provider to address any specific needs, and to set up your own activity plan. In addition, VA's MOVE! Program provides sample activity plans online at www.move.va.gov. Although we may believe that age is only a state of mind, it sure helps to have a healthy body to keep up!

Benefits of exercise from strength training:

- ★ Improves your balance and coordination, making a fall less likely
- ★ Makes it easier to do chores such as carrying groceries or doing yard work
- ★ Prevents the loss of muscle tissue
- ★ Keeps bones strong
- ★ Improves your body's ability to use insulin and maintain healthy glucose levels
- ★ Takes stress off your joints

EXERCISE TIPS:

- ➡ Consult your physician before starting an exercise program.
- ➡ Stretch to warm up before exercising and to cool down afterward.
- ➡ While exercising, drink plenty of water and rest as needed.

Is it Time for a Tune-Up?

LIFESTYLE CHANGES PROVIDE HUGE BENEFITS

Whether it's a classic sports car or a rusty old pickup, the key to a vehicle's longevity is taking care of the engine. You wouldn't want gunk clogging up the valves, so why would you let cholesterol plug up your arteries?

Lifestyle and medication both work to lower your cholesterol and your risk of heart disease. Lifestyle includes things you control, such as diet and exercise. "Diet" doesn't mean starving—it means eating generous amounts of fiber, fresh fruits and vegetables, and low-fat dairy products, while avoiding fast foods and sugary snacks.

Exercise can lower cholesterol, and it's never too late to start. Simply find something you enjoy and stick with it. Aerobic exercise (walking, biking, swimming) increases your heart rate; less intense activities, such as weight lifting, increase muscle strength and flexibility. Start any exercise program slowly, and work up to 30–60 minutes at least 3–4 times a week.

Other lifestyle changes that provide huge benefits include smoking cessation, limiting alcoholic beverages, and reducing stress.

Regular screenings are another important cholesterol management tool. Based on the results, your doctor may recommend one or more medications to help bring your HDL, LDL, and triglyceride levels into acceptable ranges.

Statins prevent cholesterol from forming and help your body reabsorb cholesterol that has accumulated on your artery walls.

Selective cholesterol absorption inhibitors prevent the absorption of cholesterol from the intestine.

Resins lower LDL by promoting increased disposal of cholesterol.

Fibrates, which lower triglycerides, may be used in combination with statins.

Niacin works to lower triglycerides—but beware of over-the-counter supplements, which are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

- ✓ **Cholesterol** is a waxy, fat-like substance in your body's cells that is carried through your bloodstream in lipoproteins.
- ✓ **HDL** (high-density lipoproteins) helps remove cholesterol from your body. The higher your HDL, the lower your chance for getting heart disease.
- ✓ **LDL** (low-density lipoproteins) attaches itself to artery walls. The higher your LDL, the higher your chance of having heart disease.
- ✓ **Triglycerides** are a type of fat in your blood.



Medication Safety is Our Priority

VA New England Healthcare System is one of the first VA sites in the country to have a program aimed at improving medication safety for all veterans. Taking your medications correctly and being aware of possible side effects or interactions with other medications or foods is very important.

At VA New England Healthcare System, we are committed to stopping hospitalizations, injuries and deaths due to medication errors. As a patient, you can help us to keep you safe. Here are some things you can do.

1. Know your medications
2. Bring your medication list or medications to your appointments
3. Tell your provider about your medications
4. Leave your provider visit with an updated medication list



Where to find us



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