Health Beat

A health and wellness newsletter published by the VA Medical Center Huntington

May 2009

What Topics Would You Like to See Covered in Health Beat?

Cathy Locher, RN, MSN, Associate Director for Nursing Services

May is such a great month. Winter is finally over and the days are hot enough to remind us summer is just around the corner. I am fairly certain very few will miss the cold.

Personally, I am reminded we have now successfully published several editions of Health Beat. I am also reminded it is my turn to write the "cover" article. If you are a regular reader, you may have noticed that members of Medical Center leadership are the main contributors for front page articles. Our Associate Director, J. B. Finlay, has contributed several times.

I have spent the past couple of weeks trying to think of an appropriate topic. After all, Mr. Seiler's article related to the Medical Center. Dr. Pellecchia, our Chief of Staff, presented a physician's view point. Mr. Finlay presented an excellent overview of new projects. What would the patients want to hear from Nursing?

Thinking nurses would be the best to ask for content ideas, I asked nurses from various areas. Nurses assigned to inpatient areas thought patients wanted more information about Methicillin Resistant Staph Aureus (MRSA) and isolation procedures. Nurses assigned to various out patient medicine areas suggested explaining the new Pod concept for Primary Care and the move from the walk-in area on the ground floor to Primary Care Clinics. Nurses working in the Business office thought I might want to address billing issues. Our Mental Health staff is excited about the pending move to soon-to-be renovated areas. Nurses working in surgery had too many ideas to even list. A couple of nurses suggested I write about patient satisfaction or summer safety.

If I took all of the advice I received, the next year's worth of Health Beat editions would be ready for publication. Just as we have nurses in all Medical Center areas, we have patients in all areas. I would like to take the opportunity to ask you, the patient, what we should include in your patient education newsletter.

Patients answering my question, "What should I write about?" would be great. If you (or your family member) want to see information about a particular topic, just let me know. You can drop a quick note in one of the "Keeping the Promise" boxes, stop by Nursing Service, ask a nurse, or personally send me an e-mail message or drop me a note.

Our Medical Center employs over 1,000 extremely talented and professional individuals. Although specific personal issues can't be discussed, there are very few topics that can't be addressed.

The Nursing Service office is located on the first floor in room 1B134, and I can be reached by phone at Ext. 2100 or by e-mail at catherine.locher@va.gov. In advance, thanks for the help.

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Important Numbers

If you have an emergency please dial 911 or your local emergency number.

If you are feeling unsafe or having thoughts of hurting yourself please call 1-800-273-TALK(8255).

Huntington VA Medical Center (HVAMC)
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- Local 304-429-6755

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Williamson Outpatient Clinic 304-235-2187
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Charleston Vet Center 304-343-3825
VA Regional Office 800-827-1000

Important Extensions for
VA Medical Center Huntington

Appointments - Cancel or Check 2311
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Billing 2440
Care Coordination 3262
DAV 2212
Dental 7117
Eligibility 2540
Fee Basis 2556
Help Desk/Enrollment 3451
Medical Specialty 7121
Mental Health 7112
MICU 2190
MOVE! Program 2351
Nutrition & Food Service 2351
Optometry (eye) 7115
Pharmacy 7120
Phone Unit 7121
Physical Therapy/Rehab Medicine 7118
Prescriptions - Order or Check 2311
Primary Care (Blue/Green Team) 7121
Prosthetics 2709
Radiology 2749
Release of Information 3152
Same Day Surgery 2862
Social Work 2837
Surgery..... 7121
Volunteer Services 3685
4-South 2130
5-South 2170

Food Allergy Often Confused With Food Intolerance

By Steve Ferguson, MS, RD, LD,
Nutrition & Food Service

A food allergy is an immune system response and occurs when the body mistakes an ingredient in food, usually a protein, as harmful and creates a defense system (antibodies) to fight it. Eight foods account for 90 percent of all food-allergic reactions. These are: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (walnut, cashew, etc.), fish, shellfish, soy, and wheat.

Sometimes a food allergy may be confused with food intolerance where food irritates a person's digestive system or they are unable to properly digest the food. Intolerance to lactose, which is found in milk and other dairy products, is the most common food intolerance, affecting about 10 percent of Americans. Food allergies affect about 2-4 percent of adults and 6-8 percent of children. Food allergies often run in families, suggesting that the condition can be inherited. Food intolerances are much more common.

Prevention and treatment of food intolerance is based on avoiding or reducing your intake of problem foods and treating symptoms when they arise. Symptoms of a food allergy can range from mild to severe and may include rash or hives, nausea, stomach pain, diarrhea, itchy skin, shortness of breath, chest pain, swelling of the airways to the lungs, or anaphylaxis (a serious allergic reaction that is rapid in onset and may cause death). Symptoms of food intolerance include nausea, stomach pain, gas, cramps or bloating, vomiting, heartburn, diarrhea, headaches, irritability or nervousness.

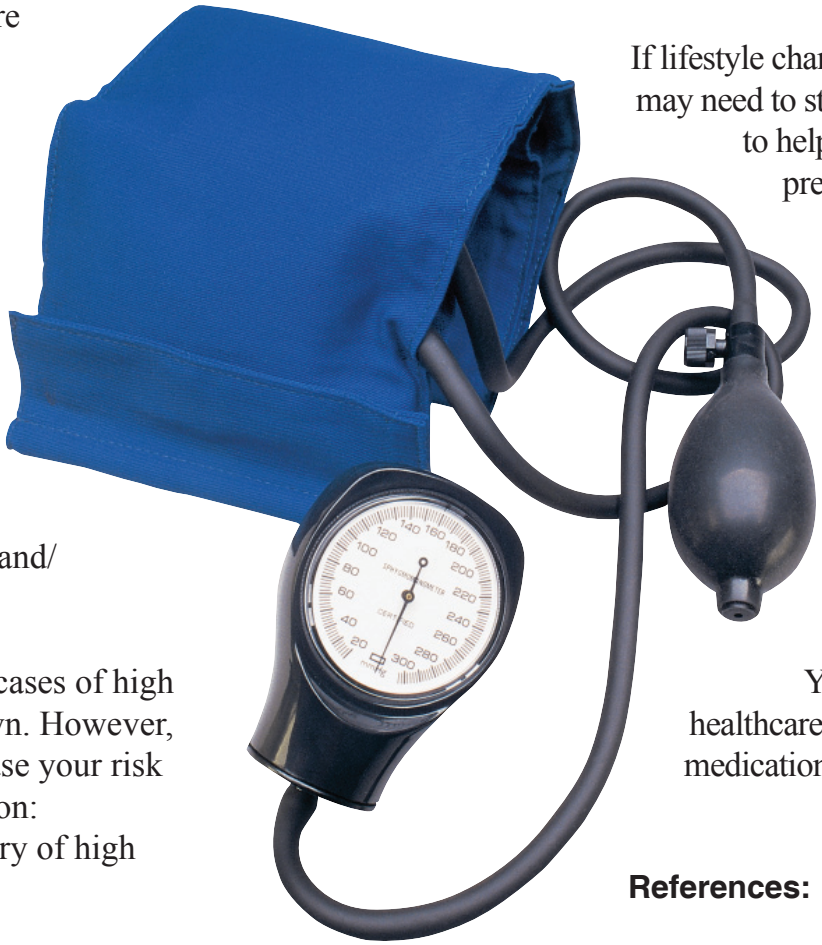
To avoid food allergies, read the ingredient labels on all packaged foods, or call the manufacturer to make sure that they do not contain any allergens. When dining out, make sure the food ordered is allergen-free. People allergic to certain foods should carry medication and wear emergency identification jewelry at all times.

If you need food and nutrition information, Call a registered dietitian at 1-800-827-8244, Ext. 2351.

1 in 3 Adults In U.S. Have High Blood Pressure Or "Prehypertension"

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is a serious condition, and many individuals are unaware of the elevation in their blood pressure.

Blood pressure is the force of the blood against the artery walls as it flows thorough the body. It is reported as two numbers, such as 112/78 mm Hg. The top number, or systolic, is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom number, or diastolic, is the pressure when the heart rests between beats. Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. If your systolic pressure is 120 to 139, or your diastolic pressure is 80 to 89 (or both), then you have "prehypertension." High blood pressure is a repeated pressure of 140 systolic or higher and/or 90 diastolic or higher.



The exact cause of most cases of high blood pressure is unknown. However, several factors can increase your risk of developing hypertension:

- Having a family history of high blood pressure
- Being overweight
- Being physically inactive
- Smoking
- Consuming excessive amounts of salt or alcohol

High blood pressure is dangerous because it forces the heart to work harder, and contributes to hardening of the arteries. Without proper treatment, high blood pressure can lead to vision problems, heart attack, stroke or kidney damage.

There are many methods to treat hypertension. The most important method is lifestyle modifications:

- Weight loss.
- Eating a healthy diet low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and salt.
- Limit alcohol to no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks per day for men.
- Be more physically active. Exercise at least 30 minutes on most days of the week.

If lifestyle changes are not enough, you may need to start at least one medication to help lower your blood pressure. Medicines, such as diuretics, can help by removing excess water from your body. Some medications can help relax and open up your blood vessels so blood can flow through better, while other medicines help your heart beat more slowly and with less force. You can work with your healthcare provider to decide which medication might be best for you.

References:

Chobanian AV, Bakris GL, Black HR, Cushman WC, Green LA, Izzo JL Jr,. Seventh report of the Joint National Committee on Prevention, Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure. Hypertension 2003 Dec;42(6):1206-52.

Hypertension statistics. American Heart Assoc, 2006. http://content.nhiondemand.com/psv/HC2.asp?objID=100228&cType=hc

Lowering blood pressure (No. 00-3281). National Institute of Health: national heart, lung, and blood institute. May 2000:1-16.

Hearing Loss Steadily on The Increase Since 1971

If you have a hearing problem, then you are not alone. According to data from several federal surveys, the number of people with hearing loss has been steadily increasing.

In 1971, there were 13.2 million people age 3 and older with diagnosed hearing problems. In 1977, 14.2 million people reported having hearing loss. That number increased to 20.3 million in 1991. As of 2000, 28.6 million Americans had some type of auditory disorder.

Hearing loss in adults has many causes. Most commonly; diseases and infections, medications that are ototoxic, exposure to noise, tumors, trauma, and effects of aging. You can help protect yourself from some of these common causes by following these tips:

- Protect your ears from noise. Make sure to use hearing protection devices when around loud noises like lawn mowers, gunfire, power tools.
- Never use cotton swabs (or any other object) inside of your ear canal. These items only create more ear wax problems.
- Be aware of rapid changes in your hearing or balance, and if they occur, seek medical attention quickly.

Often, hearing slowly decreases over time, so it can be difficult to know when to seek help. If you find yourself in the following situations frequently, then it's time to schedule an appointment with Audiology:

- You often complain that people mumble, that speech is not clear, or you hear only parts of conversations when people are talking.
- You often ask people to repeat what they are saying.
- Your friends or relatives tell you that you don't seem to hear very well.
- You need to ask others about the details of a meeting that you just attended, or need to ask someone to repeat announcements just heard at a social meeting or church.
- Others say you play the TV or radio too loudly.
- You find that looking at people when they talk to you makes it easier to understand, especially when you're in a noisy place.

Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are utilizing audiology services frequently. A recent study conducted by audiologists at the Army Audiology and Speech Center shows that 49 percent of all soldiers exposed to blasts in Iraq and Afghanistan had tinnitus (ringing in the ears). A total of 60 percent had hearing loss, which is often related to tinnitus.

Audiologists are also treating returning Veterans with traumatic brain injuries, auditory processing disorders, and balance disorders.

At the VA, audiologists can meet your hearing health needs by providing comprehensive hearing and balance evaluations, hearing aids, and assistive technology. All Veterans with demonstrated communicative need are eligible for assistance.

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Your comments, suggestions, ideas, and questions regarding this newsletter can be sent to the Medical Media Section of Learning Resources by phone at 304.429.6755 ext. 3206, toll-free at 800.827.8244, by fax at 304.429.0272 or by e-mail at brian.arrington@va.gov.

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Act Quickly at First Signs of a Stoke – Time is Critical For Effective Treatment

May is American Stroke Month, and it is very important to be able to recognize the signs and symptoms of a stroke. Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States, and can cause significant disability if the warning signs go untreated.

A stroke happens when a blood vessel that carries oxygen and nutrients to the brain is blocked by a clot or bursts. A part of the brain cannot get the blood and oxygen it needs, so it starts to die.

Time is critical if someone has stroke symptoms because most life saving drugs need to be given within three hours of the first sign or symptom of a stroke.

The following are warning signs of a stroke:

1. Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body.
2. Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding.
3. Sudden trouble seeing out of one or both eyes.
4. Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
5. Sudden, severe headache with no known cause.

If you or anyone you know has one or any of these warning signs, do not delay! Call 9-1-1 immediately and check the time the warning sign or signs started.

Life saving treatment can be given with a clot-busting drug called tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) within the first three hours, which can lessen long-term disability caused by stroke.

VAMC Huntington to Offer CPR & AED Training to Vets

In December of 2007, Congress passed a bill designating the first week of June as National Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and Automated External Defibrillator (AED) Awareness Week. Congress acknowledged the importance of all Americans learning lifesaving skills such as CPR and AED use.

Those who fall victim of a sudden cardiac arrest each year have a mortality rate of 95 percent. This bill helps educate the public in the use of CPR and AEDs. By training the public, the 5 percent survival rate can be increased and save more lives at the community level. Many schools, airports, grocery stores, and department stores are adding AED's in case of emergency.

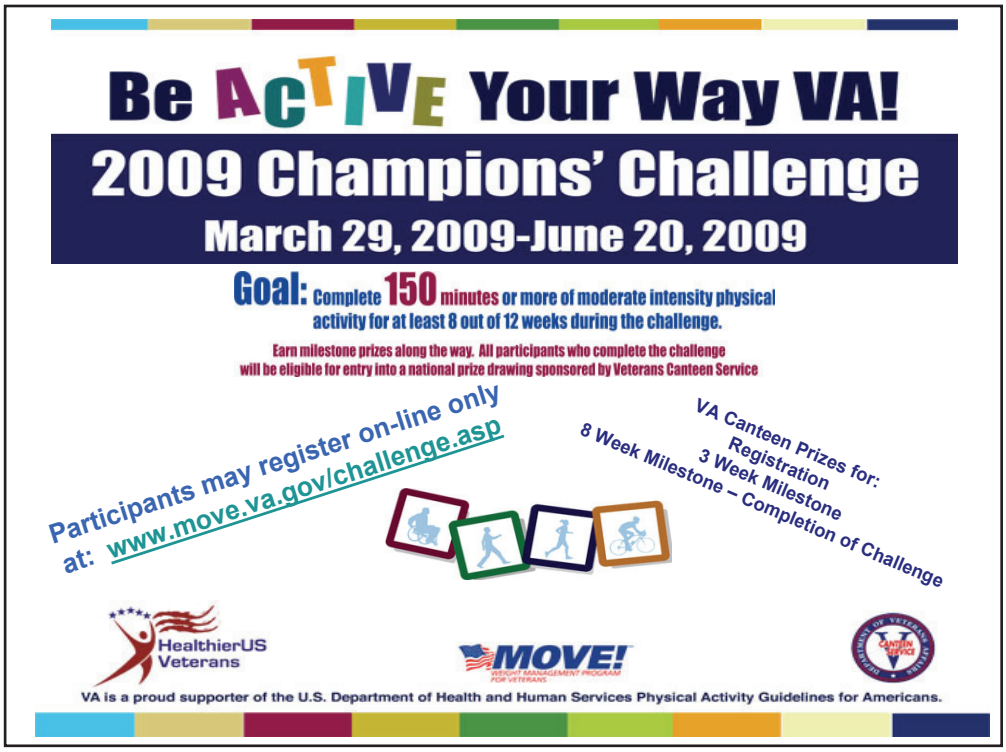
According to the American Heart Association (AHA), on average it takes 8 to 10 minutes for first responders to reach a victim. It is essential for the public to be trained in lifesaving skills and to feel comfortable performing CPR and using an AED until advanced help arrives. By providing access to these techniques, sudden cardiac arrest victims can be assisted during those precious moments from when they collapse and help arrives. If you provide compressions only during an emergency situation, the AHA has found it works just as well as standard CPR for sudden cardiac arrest in adults.

The AHA has developed a program called CPR Anytime. This course is designed for community teaching and incorporates a DVD to maximize learning. The DVD is 22 minutes long, and provides information about choking, CPR techniques, and AED use. The DVD can be viewed in the convenience of your own home or in a community setting. Simply follow along with the video while you practice compressions and ventilations. CPR anytime can be purchased from AHA for $34.95, and can be reused to help educate friends and family.

AHA CPR Instructors will be offering classes in the Recreation Hall to educate our Veterans and immediate family members on CPR Anytime, which includes CPR & AED use. Classes will be conducted the first week of June, and are limited to 16 people per class.

Pre-registration is necessary to ensure everyone is able to participate. Veterans will have priority. Classes will be held June 2 from 8-10 a.m., and from 10 a.m. to Noon. Classes will also be held on June 4 from Noon-2 p.m., and 2-4 p.m. To register please call Missy Johnson at 304-429-6741 x2103.

We are able to offer this class to our Veterans once per year, and look forward to educating as many Veterans as possible. If you are unable to attend but would like more information about *CPR Anytime,* you can log onto the AHA website at www.americanheart.org.



Photos by James Gathney, CDC

by Tricia M. Whittaker, Pharm.D.
Pharmacy Resident

Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne infection in North America. Lyme disease is caused by bacteria that are transmitted to humans through the deer tick. The tick has to be attached to the skin for at least two days. The most common symptoms of Lyme disease include fever, headache, fatigue, flu-like symptoms, and a "target-like" rash around the tick bite. Most cases of Lyme disease can be treated with antibiotics without any long-term consequences from the infection. However, some rare cases do lead to residual chronic symptoms.

The best way to prevent Lyme disease is to prevent exposure to ticks. The following are some examples that can help you prevent tick bites:

- Wear protective clothing, such as long sleeve shirts and pants.
- Wear light-colored clothes.
- Use insect repellant that contains DEET.
- Check your body daily for ticks.
- Promptly remove any attached ticks.

If you find an attached tick, the best way to remove it is with tweezers. Grasp the tick close to the skin and pull straight out. Do NOT squeeze or twist the body of the tick. Clean the exposed skin and disinfect the tweezers. Finally, wash your hands with soap and water. It is not recommended to "burn" the tick out of the skin. If tick parts remain after removal or if you experience any of the above symptoms of Lyme disease, you should see your primary provider.

While early Lyme disease can be easily treated with antibiotics, there are some rare cases of chronic Lyme disease. That's why it is important to prevent Lyme disease by preventing exposure to ticks.

HEALTH BEAT

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December 2008

Director Announces Launch of Patient Newsletter at VA Medical Center

With this first issue of *Health Beat*, and those to follow, we are rededicating ourselves to keeping our patients and staff up to date on VA programs and general health care issues.

Edward H. Sexton
Medical Center Director

The articles in each issue will be written or compiled by members of the Medical Center staff who have acquired knowledge and practical information that should prove useful for patients, their families, and our newest employees.

Some articles will have information about existing services and provide information on how to best access these services. Others will give information on new or planned services.

Many of the articles will be short. We believe a series of articles on a subject that are short and to the point will best serve our readers.

Many articles will focus on health care. Some will be disease specific and will try to provide reference material.

Because not all patients have access to today's technology, we will provide information from quality, computer-based resources. These will be summarized and written for those who might benefit from the information most. Our goal is to help patients get the information they need to better care for themselves. We will provide information by simply telling it as we see it in a style everyone can understand and, perhaps, enjoy.

As this newsletter evolves, we will be seeking input from you, the readers, for suggestions for improvement.

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Flu: The Holiday Gift You Do Not Want to Give, or Get

By Rita Thomas, RN, BSN, MRSA Prevention Coordinator

The best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each year; but, there are other things that can help keep you from getting sick.

- Avoid close contact with people that have flu-like symptoms. These include fever, headache, fatigue, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Keep your distance from others as well.
- Stay home when you are sick. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that you stay home from work or school.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, then throw the used tissue in the trash. This keeps germs from spreading.
- Practice other healthy habits. Get plenty of rest, exercise, eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.
- Keep household surfaces clean. This includes counter tops, bed rails and wheelchairs. Use a disinfectant on these surfaces daily.
- Wash your hands! This is the most important habit of all. Wet your hands with warm water, apply soap and rub hands together for at least 15 seconds. Rinse your hands with water and dry with a towel used just for you. Alcohol-based hand cleaners also work well. You also should use lotion to keep your hands from getting dry and cracked.

Want to receive the latest edition of Health Beat and other VA newsletters by e-mail?

Go to the Medical Center's Web site at www.huntington.va.gov, and click on the News by E-mail link to sign up.

Three Local Veterans Participate in Winter Sports Clinic

Bobby Branham, an Army Veteran from Louisa, Ky., Steven Cobb, an Army Veteran from Cross Lanes, WV and Daniel O'Connor, a Marine Corps Veteran from St. Albans, WV, challenged themselves at the 23rd National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic held in Snowmass Village, Colorado March 29 – April 3, 2009. It was the first time in recent years that Voluntary Service at the VAMC was able to sponsor local Veterans to participate in this annual VA rehabilitation event.

Bobby Branham (Left), Steven Cobb (Top Right) and Dan O'Conner (Bottom Right) participate in events at the 23rd National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic held in Snowmass Village, Colorado.

The Clinic, co-sponsored by the VA and DAV, creates 'Miracles on a Mountainside" by being the world leader in teaching adaptive Alpine and Nordic skiing to Veterans with disabilities while also introducing them to other adaptive sports such as scuba diving, rock climbing, sled hockey, curling, snowmobiling and skeet shooting.

Vietnam Veteran Dan O'Connor, an amputee, tackled the mountain on a mono-ski. A first time skier, he was soon gliding down the mountain on his own after only a short time of instruction and assistance from a certified ski instructor. Dan also tried his hand at snowmobiling, skeet shooting and rock climbing. He appreciated the camaraderie with the other Veterans. Steven Cobb is a combat-wounded Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although illness and white-out snow conditions kept him from skiing, he participated in some of the other activities, including skeet shooting and enjoying the majestic mountain views from the gondola ride in Aspen. Being visually impaired didn't stop Bobby Branham from strapping on skis and joining the other blind Veterans on the slopes. Bobby also participated in the other adaptive sports activities and said the event was a great experience for him.

The Winter Sports Clinic is one of six annual VA Rehabilitation Events. Voluntary Service is currently planning fundraising activities to send other Veterans to upcoming events. Interested Veterans should check out the Web site at www.specialevents.va.gov.

Weekly Chapel Services in the Veterans Chapel, Room 1C106 on First Floor.

These interdenominational services are Sunday at 8:30 a.m., and are open to patients, families, Hoptel visitors and employees.

Look forward to seeing you there!