

Women Veterans: A Growing Patient Population

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A blue background with white stars and a red and white striped pattern, reminiscent of the American flag.

WOMEN VETERANS ★ MAKE ★ HISTORY

Generations of Service,
Lifetimes of Success

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH | **VA** |  U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs | Women Veterans Call Center 1-855-829-6636

Disclaimer and Warning

- I am not speaking on an official capacity for the Department of Veterans' Affairs
- I have no disclosures
- Trigger warning: There will be discussion of sexual trauma and suicide during this presentation

Objectives

- Understand the demographics of the women veteran populations
- Understand the unique health challenges faced by women veterans
- Understand the health risks faced by women veterans while serving
- Understand the prevalence of military sexual trauma and PTSD in the women veteran population
- Understand resources provided by the VA for women veterans

West Virginia's VA Facilities

Combination of medical centers (VAMC) with satellite clinics, or "CBOCS"

- **Beckley VAMC:** Greenbrier County and Princeton CBOCs
- **Hershel Woody Williams VAMC** (Huntington): Charleston, Gallipolis (OH), Lenore (Williamson, WV), Prestonsburg (KY)
- **Louis A. Johnson VAMC** (Clarksburg): Braxton County, Monongalia County, Tucker County, Wood County, and Rural Mobile Unit
- **Martinsburg VAMC:** Cumberland (MD), Fort Detrick (MD), Franklin, Hagerstown, Harrisonburg (VA), Petersburg, Stephens City (VA)

Home-based primary care

State Veteran's Nursing Home

- Located adjacent to LAJVAMC but ran by the state

General eligibility guidelines

- Must have received a “other than dishonorable” discharge
- If enlisted after 9/7/1980 or entered active duty after 10/16/1981, must have served 24 continuous months active duty OR been federally activated Reservists or Guard members who served the full period called to active duty
 - STATE activation of the national guard DOES NOT COUNT
- Service-connected conditions: conditions incurred or aggravated during a period of service
- Military Sexual Trauma: Experienced sexual trauma during active duty or training
 - No minimum service requirement
- Psychosis or Mental Illness: Developed within two years of discharge
- When in doubt, call 877-333-8487 or apply online

Is VA healthcare free?

Short answer: No

Long answer: It depends

The VA can now bill certain third-party providers

Cannot bill Medicare or Medicaid



Women Veterans

- Population has increased by 175% since 2000
- There are 2 million women veterans in the United States
- Median age is 49.2 years, but roughly 1 million veterans are between the ages of 20 and 49
- More than half of women veterans carry a service-connected disability rating
- Serve in all branches and can now also serve in combat units



Air Force personnel from the 96th Medical Group stands at parade rest as part of an all-female formation prior to the base retreat ceremony on March 30, 2017, at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. (Samuel King Jr./Air Force)



Women Veterans and the VA

- Women's Health Services program launched in 2008
- Women veterans are a rapidly growing portion of VA patients with a growing number of young women seeking care at the VA
- Seeks to provide comprehensive primary care for women veterans, utilizing specially-designated Women's Health Primary Care Physicians

Women's Health Primary Care

- Provides numerous primary care services across the lifespan
- Basic women's reproductive care
- Coordination of non-VA care services
- Coordination of maternity care services
- Integrated mental health
- Ordering and tracking of mammography and cervical cancer screening
- Associated with higher satisfaction for patients as well as higher rates of cancer screening which exceed that of other demographic sets (Bean-Mayberry 2015)



So...what health
conditions do women
veterans face?

Risks of serving

- Environmental exposures
 - Chemicals, Radiation, Respiratory, Depleted uranium
- Combat exposures
 - Both on front lines and in combat support roles
- Training exercises
- Military sexual trauma



Most frequent treatment domains

Musculoskeletal

Endocrine/Metabolic/Nutritional

Mental health

Cardiovascular

Sense organ

High visit rates for reproductive health in women aged 18-44

Musculoskeletal Conditions

- Significant physical strain endured by women in active duty, whether in combat zones or not
- Most injuries occur during basic training and women are MORE likely to return to training after an injury than men
- Chronic pain can become an issue
 - Incidence has increased sixfold between women veterans aged 40-64
- Infantry units carry between 60 and 100 pounds of gear



From left, Marines Sgt. Sheena Adams and Lance Cpl. Kristi Baker and Navy Hospital Corpsman Shannon Crowley work with a Female Engagement Team in Afghanistan in November 2010. Paula Bronstein, Getty Images.

Musculoskeletal Conditions

- High rates of spine disorders, particularly lumbosacral
- Lower extremity joint issues, especially knees
- Post-traumatic arthritis from fractures sustained in combat or in training
- Overall rates exceed that seen in male veterans
 - Connective tissue disease OR 5.89
 - MSK conditions, other 1.72
 - Myalgia/myositis 4.43



Photo Credit: US Army

Endocrine/Metabolic/Nutritional

- Rates appear to align with general population rates
- More likely than male veterans to have thyroid disease, vasculitidies, rheumatoid arthritis and other related diseases, and eating disorders
- Older women veterans also at risk for osteoporosis, similar to the total female population



Traumatic Brain Injuries

- Have more severe symptoms with a higher rate than in men
- Very common injury, especially in the most recent combats
 - MVAs, IED injuries and explosions
- Women who suffer TBI in the service have multiple longterm complications
 - More likely to develop substance use disorders
 - More likely to be unemployed after deployment
 - Seven times more likely to be homeless



Mental Health

- Significant area of concern for men and women veterans
- Suicide rate is about twice that of non-veterans and more likely to use firearms as a method of suicide
- Women veterans are more likely than men to report mental health conditions
 - Major depressive disorder AOR of 1.87
 - Eating disorders 9.99
 - Dissociative disorders 3.69
 - Acute stress disorders 2.11



PTSD

- Very common, with causes ranging from war to intimate partner violence
 - Community studies suggest that women, both veterans and civilians, experience PTSD at a rate 2-3 times that of men
 - About half of all women will be exposed to a significant traumatic event in their lifetime
- In one large study, women veterans reported the highest rates of lifetime and past-year PTSD with rates almost double that of male veterans
- Robust mental health and PTSD treatment programs in place within the VA

Military Sexual Trauma

- Screening for MST is performed regularly for all veterans, both male and female
- **1 in 3** women veterans report having experienced MST
 - Overall, women have a 1 in 5 chance of sexual assault in their lifetimes
- Increases risks for numerous other health conditions including depression, PTSD, substance use disorders, and chronic pelvic pain
- Trauma-informed care, particularly for sensitive exams, is vitally important

Conclusion

- Women veterans are a rapidly growing demographic and patient population
- Their experience differs from male veterans and from their civilian counterparts
- It is important to be aware of their service and how this may impact their longterm health

