

Health Promotion Disease Prevention Program

Safety in Health

Staying Safe

B. Odermann, MS, RN, HPDP Program Mgr.

Safe. This simple word has a lot of meaning. It can mean being free from injury, pain or danger. Safe also means being dependable and trustworthy, as well as being careful. Military personnel learn a lot about safety in their training. They learn to be prepared for military conflict and to safeguard against harm. Isn't it as important that you plan for safety in your day-to-day life, and with your health? You deserve to live the best life possible, and there are some basic steps you can take to ensure that.

This issue of Healthy Veterans focuses on a variety of situations in which Veterans can control their safety. Nothing is ever foolproof—accidents can happen despite the best of intentions and preparation. But damage can be minimized with some simple precautions.

In this issue, you'll hear from experienced Emergency Department staff about ways to increase safety when driving. Our Health Behavior Coordinator writes about keeping safe from self-harm. One of the PACT social workers provides information about preventing and dealing with domestic violence. You'll also read about a program the VA offers to help you stay safe in your home

as you age. Personal safety in intimate situations is also addressed.



Self-Harm and Suicide

Gillian Freeborn, PsyD
Health Behavior Coordinator

Suicidal behaviors and self-harm behaviors are often misunderstood. To improve chances of getting effective treatment, it is important to understand the differences between these two kinds of behavior. The major difference between them is the "intent" of the behavior.

With suicidal behaviors or acts, the intent is to end one's life, to end pain and suffering. While many suicides occur without any noticeable warning signs, several signs may be observed such as: increased substance use, taking unnecessary risks, exhibiting increased anger or sadness, talking about wanting to die, isolating or withdrawing, saying goodbye to loved ones, giving away possessions, referring to death via poetry or drawings, changing eating or sleeping patterns, or declining in performance.

The intent with self-harm is to find relief and cope with physical or emotional stress and suffering. Common acts of self-harm include cutting parts of the body, burning, picking at skin or pulling hair. These behaviors can become habits. Warning signs of self-harm

include many cuts or burns on the body, wearing loose or large clothes on warm days to hide wounds, making excuses for having wounds on the body. Other cues are finding razors, scissors or lighters in unexpected places and social isolation or avoiding social situations. Injuries may be serious and should be taken seriously. The intent with self-harm is not to commit suicide, however the actions may result in accidental death if steps are not taken to treat the underlying emotional stress.

If you or someone you know shows warning signs of self-harm or suicide, please seek help immediately through emergency care, or by calling the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Confidential chat is also available at VeteransCrisisLine.net or by sending a text to 83855.



Safe Sex

A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is an infection that is spread during sexual activity. Any person who has sex can get an STI. Your risk increases if you:

- have multiple partners
- have a sexual partner who has multiple partners
- use alcohol or drugs to excess, which can lower inhibitions and increase your risk.

If certain STIs aren't treated, they may lead to cancer and even death. Some cause sterility or can cause harm to an unborn child.

How can you prevent or reduce risk for STIs? Practice safe sex, get regular checkups, and get treatment right away when you think you may have a problem. Use condoms during each sexual encounter. Get tested if you have any risk for an STI. Make sure your partner gets treated if you do have an STI, so it won't get passed back to you.

For more information, check with your PACT team. Visit the Veterans Health Library to read about other measures you can take to keep sex safe.

Adapted from the Veterans Health Library
http://www.veteranshealthlibrary.org/Encyclopedia/142,82197_VA



Safety on the Road After Combat Duty

Dana Kitsch, RN, BSN, Emergency Dept.

The best kind of driver is a predictable driver. When a car in the left lane has its right blinker on, you know that driver is trying to merge into your lane. We rely on that kind of predictability to make it home every day.

When you're in combat, though, being unpredictable is what might get you home safely. That kind of driving is viewed as offensive back home, and could net you a traffic ticket or cause you to hurt someone. Here are some habits you may have developed while deployed that are worth reexamining now: cruising right down the middle of the road, or going off-road; driving unpredictably – speeding up and slowing down, changing lanes suddenly; tailgating or matching another

driver's actions, such as lane changes or speeding; swerving unexpectedly to avoid common road objects, such as trash or road kill, or around road repairs.

Now that you're home, it's important to be a defensive driver. Here is what it takes to be a defensive driver:

- ▶ refresh yourself on your state's driving laws by getting the driver's handbook from the Department of Motor Vehicles
- ▶ be courteous with pedestrians, bicyclists and other drivers who share the road with you
- ▶ avoid road rage—it's not worth ruining your day
- ▶ make sure you're always at least three seconds behind the car in front of you
- ▶ stick to the speed limit; put your phone down and drive—that phone call or text can wait
- ▶ always use your seatbelt, and make sure passengers buckle up too
- ▶ if you drink alcohol, do so responsibly and never drink and drive—arrange for a designated driver ahead of time or get a taxi



Safety on the Road as you Age

Dana Kitsch, RN, BSN, Emergency Dept.

Getting older does not necessarily mean a person's driving days are over. Most older adult drivers are safe, because they have a lot of experience.

Yet it is important to plan ahead and take steps to ensure the safety of yourself and others on the road. Vehicle crashes can result in more serious injuries to older drivers.

Ability to see, hear and react can change as you age. The following questions may help you to decide about your ability to drive safely.



- ▶ Do you get lost on routes that should be familiar?
- ▶ Have you received a ticket for a driving violation?
- ▶ Have you experienced a near miss or crash recently?
- ▶ Have you been advised to limit/stop driving due to a health reason?
- ▶ Are you overwhelmed by road signs and markings while driving?
- ▶ Are you taking any medication that might affect driving safely?
- ▶ Are you speeding or driving too slowly for no reason?
- ▶ Are you suffering any illnesses that may affect driving skills?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, talk with your health care team. Ask your

provider if any of your health problems might make it unsafe for you to drive. Talk with your family and friends to make a plan to decide when it is no longer safe to drive.



Motorcycle Safety

Dana Kitsch, RN, BSN, Emergency Dept.

Drivers are to safely share the road with motorcycles and be extra alert to keep motorcyclists safe. Motorcyclists need to make themselves visible to other drivers.

Wearing a helmet is important for anyone riding or driving a motorcycle. Studies show that effects of helmets upon seeing and hearing are far too small to compromise the safety benefits offered by head protection.

Alcohol use results in changes in motorcycle control and driver behavior. In general, drunk or “buzzed” drivers demonstrated longer response times and showed impaired driving.



Domestic & Intimate Partner Violence

Jaime Wenner, LCSW
Blue Team/Women’s Health Social Worker

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence (DV) are serious and preventable problems that affect millions every year.

The term “intimate partner violence” describes physical, sexual, or psychological harm or stalking behavior by a current or former partner or spouse. This behavior ranges from emotional abuse to chronic or severe battering or even death. It occurs among heterosexual or same-sex couples whether or not there is sexual intimacy or the involved people live together.

Domestic violence includes intimate partner violence, but refers to any violence or abuse that occurs within the home. This can include child abuse, elder abuse, and other types of interpersonal violence.

Everyone is at risk for experiencing intimate partner violence. However, females between the ages of 18-35 and female veterans are at a higher risk of violence than others. Warning signs of intimate partner violence include unexplained or repeated injuries, delay in seeking care for injuries, injuries during pregnancy, multiple ER visits, suicide attempts, substance use, fearful or evasive behavior and lack of independence. Those who have served in the recent armed conflicts may be at an even greater risk due to higher rates of mental health concerns including PTSD and alcohol misuse as well as anger and interpersonal aggression.

Medical and behavioral health professionals are often the first line of defense in recognizing Veterans who are experiencing and/or using violence. The domestic violence/intimate partner violence awareness program was developed to fully address DV/IPV among veterans, including identification and assessment, plus offering services. Those services include crisis assistance, safety planning, advocacy, case management, counseling and/or housing resources. The program will raise

awareness as well as provide VA health care professionals with the training and skills to effectively intervene. Screening tools, best methods for treatment, and community relationships are being developed.



STEPPING ON Workshops Help Veterans Prevent Falls

Sessions help older adults gain confidence and reduce falls

Amanda Hoffer, DPT
Physical Therapist

One in every three adults over age 65 falls every year. Falling is not normal for older adults and older adults can learn how to take steps to prevent falls.



Stepping On, a workshop offered at the Fargo VA, teaches older adults to do just that. Research shows that adults who take the workshop gain confidence, reduce falls by over 30% and have fewer hospitalizations and emergency department visits.

Falls can be physically, financially, and emotionally devastating. Fear of falling often limits older adults and results in less mobility and more isolation. “The good news,” says Amanda Hoffer, PT “is that people can learn how to prevent falls and can make the changes they need in their lives to reduce their risk. The *Stepping On* workshops are a

wonderful complement to medical care, helping older adults to take control of their lives and make the changes in their home and lifestyle to lower their risk.”

Stepping On workshops are delivered in seven 2-hour weekly sessions. They are taught by Kristi Steidl, Occupational Therapist and Amanda Hoffer, Physical Therapist. The workshop is offered at the Fargo VA every fall and spring. It is for adults age 60 and over, who live in their own homes or apartments and do not rely on a walker, scooter, or wheelchair indoors most of the time.

During the seven-week session, participants receive support from trained leaders and other workshop participants, learning strength and balance exercises, medications’ impact on falls, vision, safe footwear, home modifications, and community safety.

Our next Stepping On class begins **September 2**, and goes through October 14. To take part in this class call the VA at 701-239-3700 extension 9-4591 for registration information.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- VHA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention: www.prevention.va.gov

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