



RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

- **Women Veterans with mental health disorders are more likely to have experienced unintended pregnancy than those without**, found a VA Pittsburgh Health Care System study. In a phone survey, 60 percent of women with at least one mental health disorder reported having an unintended pregnancy, while 51 percent of women without a mental health disorder said they had had an unintended pregnancy. Mental health disorders were also connected to a greater number of unintended pregnancies. ([Journal of Internal Medicine](#), December 2018)
- **Prenatal exposure to maternal stress and depression could lead to psychological disorders in children**, according to a study by VA researchers and colleagues. They found that children born to mothers with PTSD, depression, or both together showed a pattern of gene expression not seen in children of mothers without psychological disorders. These changes in gene expression were similar to genetic biomarkers associated with autism spectrum disorder and schizophrenia. ([Brain, Behavior, and Immunity](#), October 2018)
- **Oxytocin did not improve social cognition in patients with schizophrenia**, in a study by VA San Diego Healthcare System researchers. Social cognition refers to how a person deals with other people, and is often impaired in people with schizophrenia.

Although oxytocin has been shown to improve social cognition in the past, schizophrenia patients taking the drug showed no improvements in social cognition over the course of the study. ([Psychological Medicine](#), Sept. 5, 2018)

- **The PRIME program helped patients with recent-onset schizophrenia improve their mood and motivation**, in a study by San Francisco VA Medical Center researchers. PRIME is a mobile digital tool designed to improve motivation and quality of life. After using PRIME for 12 weeks, participants had significant improvements in depression, defeatist beliefs, self-efficacy, and motivation, compared with schizophrenia patients not using the program. They also had greater improvements in social motivation three months after the trial. ([Schizophrenia Bulletin](#), Aug. 20, 2018)

- **Mortality rates for people with schizophrenia are not decreasing**, according to a study by VA San Diego Healthcare System researchers. Mortality rates for people with schizophrenia have not gone down in recent years, despite a decline in mortality rates in the general population. People with schizophrenia tend to have a shorter life expectancy than those without, by 15 to 20 years. The researchers suggest that major changes in mental health stigma, health care, and economic policy are urgently needed to improve care for people with schizophrenia. ([Schizophrenia Research](#), June 2018)

- **An international consortium including several VA researchers identified genetic markers that predict lithium nonresponse.**

Lithium is the standard mood stabilizer used to treat bipolar disorder, but up to 30 percent of patients do not respond to the drug. Researchers looked at the genomes of more than 2,000 patients with bipolar disorder. They found patients who had gene variations previously shown to predict schizophrenia also did not respond to lithium. The results can be used to predict how effective lithium treatment will be for individual patients. ([JAMA Psychiatry](#), Jan. 1, 2018)

- **Anxiety sensitivity may link PTSD and suicide risk**, according to a Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System study. Anxiety sensitivity is an exaggerated fear of experiencing symptoms related to anxiety, separate from the actual symptoms. Researchers found a significant association between the severity of PTSD in 60 male Veterans and a greater frequency of suicidal thoughts, plans, and impulses. They also found that cognitive anxiety sensitivity concerns may be responsible for this link—meaning that when people with PTSD worry that their personalities have changed or that they are not thinking normally, they may be at increased risk of suicidal behavior. ([Journal of Affective Disorders](#), November 2017)

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VA investigators are looking at the co-occurrence of mental health issues and physical disorders—for instance, depression in those with spinal cord injury, or substance abuse in patients with chronic pain.

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