



Photo: ©Merjan_Apostolovic



VA research on **SUICIDE PREVENTION**

VA researchers are working to identify factors that increase the risk of suicide among Veterans and planning studies to prevent suicide by directly responding to a Veteran's individual risk profile

ABOUT SUICIDE PREVENTION

- In 2019, [VA's National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#) estimated that 6,139 U.S. Veterans died by suicide in 2017, an average of 16.8 per day. In that year, the suicide rate for Veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-Veteran adults.
- Veterans can be at risk for suicide for a variety of reasons. Some are coping with stress or unaddressed chronic health conditions stemming from military service. Many Veterans have underlying mental health conditions or substance use disorders, in some cases aggravated by their military service, which increases their risk of suicide. Many recently discharged service members have difficulty with personal relationships or their transition back to civilian life.
- VA maintains a toll-free, confidential Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255 (1-800-273-TALK)**. The hotline is staffed by mental health professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week. VA also offers a texting service at #838255.
- Veterans and their families can chat online with trained counselors at www.VeteransCrisisLine.net. Registration with VA or enrollment in VA health care is

not necessary. VA also has full-time suicide prevention coordinators at each of its 170 hospitals.

VA RESEARCH ON SUICIDE PREVENTION: OVERVIEW

- Investigators are exploring risk factors for suicide in Veterans and helping to improve risk assessments. They are also working to develop effective interventions and to identify crucial time periods at which to intervene.
- Some researchers are developing national data systems to capture and manage information on Veterans that relate to suicide, attempted suicide, and suicide reattempts among Veterans. These systems will help investigators determine risk and protective factors for suicidal behavior among Veterans.
- VA's [Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention](#) has a mission to reduce occurrences of suicide, primarily by studying and applying public health approaches to suicide prevention.
- VA's [Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center](#) studies suicide with the goal of reducing suicide in the Veteran population.

- VA's [Suicide Prevention Research Impact NeTwork \(SPRINT\)](#) is a research consortium that aims to accelerate suicide prevention research, leading to improvements in care that will ultimately result in reduction in suicide behavior among Veterans.
- VA is part of the [Military Suicide Research Consortium](#), a partnership that manages research to increase knowledge on topics such as risk assessment, treatment, and prevention, as they pertain to suicidal behavior in the military and among Veterans.
- In 2017, VA and the Department of Energy [announced](#) a partnership focused on the secure analysis of large amounts of health and genomic data to help advance health care for Veterans and others in areas such as suicide prevention.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

- 2007** – Established a [Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention](#) in Canandaigua, N.Y.
- 2012** – [Found](#) that the experience of killing in war was strongly associated with thoughts of suicide
- 2016** – [Determined](#) that Veterans receiving high doses of opioid painkillers were more

(Continued on back)



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

DISCOVERY ★ INNOVATION ★ ADVANCEMENT

www.research.va.gov



than twice as likely to die by suicide, compared with those receiving low doses

2016 - Launched the [REACH VET](#) program, which analyzes existing data to identify Veterans at a statistically elevated risk for suicide and allows VA to provide them with pre-emptive care and support

2018 - [Demonstrated](#) the value of a simple emergency room intervention to help reduce suicide risk

2019 - Along with the White House, established the [PREVENTS](#) Task Force to develop a national research strategy to prevent suicide among Veterans

2019 - Funded the [SPRINT](#) Consortium of Research to accelerate suicide prevention research

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

- **Spiritual difficulties may increase suicidal thoughts**, found a Durham VA study. Perceived lack of control and problems with self-forgiveness increases the risk of suicidal thoughts. Perceived punishment by God and a lack of meaning or purpose significantly increased the risk of suicide attempts. ([Depression and Anxiety](#), August 2020)

- **Sexual dysfunction affects men**

- and **women’s risk of suicidal thoughts differently**, according to a San Diego VA study. In male Veterans with PTSD, decreased sexual pleasure and decreased frequency of sexual intercourse were linked with more recent suicidal thoughts. In female Veterans with PTSD, increased sexual frequency was marginally linked with increased suicidal thoughts. ([Archives of Sexual Behavior](#), July 2020)

- **VA Puget Sound researchers studied factors linked to Veterans who died by suicide using firearms**. They found that Veterans who used a firearm for suicide were less likely to have engaged in suicide prevention efforts or to have received safety counseling and planning. They also had lower levels of notable risk factors such as prior suicide attempt and not showing up for appointments. However, they were more likely to have unsecured firearms in their home. ([Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior](#), June 2020)

- **Adverse social determinants of health were strongly associated with suicidal thoughts and attempts**, in a study of VA patient data. Social determinants of health include factors such as violence, housing instability, and financial problems. Veterans with multiple adverse factors had increased risk of suicide. Each additional adverse

factor increased a Veteran’s odds of suicidal thoughts by 67% and suicide attempt by 49%. ([Journal of General Internal Medicine](#), June 2020)

- **Veterans are aware of VA’s suicide prevention programs, but only a small percentage use them**, found a VA Connecticut study. The majority of Veterans surveyed knew about VA Vet Centers, the Veterans Crisis Line, and VA’s Center for Suicide Prevention. However, only 5% had attended a local community event related to Veterans suicide and only 2% had used VA’s [Virtual Hope Box](#). ([Administration and Policy in Mental Health](#), January 2020)

- **Having traumatic brain injury symptoms before deployment is linked with an increased risk of suicide attempt following deployment**, found a VA San Diego study. In nearly 8,000 soldiers studied, those with post-concussive or TBI symptoms prior to deployment had 31% higher odds of suicide attempt than those without symptoms. ([Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation](#), January 2020)

For more information on VA studies on suicide prevention and other key topics relating to Veterans’ health, please visit www.research.va.gov/topics

In 2017, the suicide rate for Veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-Veteran adults.

Updated September 2020 • For a digital version of this fact sheet with active links to sources, visit www.research.va.gov/topics