

# VETERANS' ADVANTAGE

FALL 2008

THE WELLNESS MAGAZINE  
FOR NEW YORK / NEW JERSEY VETERANS

**Visit VA—  
in cyberspace!**

**Reaching out  
to our newest  
veterans**

**Keep the flu from  
bugging you**





From the Network Director:

# Where every day is Veterans Day

Dear Veteran,

**O**n Veterans Day, our nation will pause to thank you for your service. Veterans Day is the official day to honor you, America's veterans, for securing and protecting our democracy and ensuring the freedom that we enjoy—and others in the world envy.

At VA, we come to work each day with a clear and noble purpose. It's our privilege to keep President Lincoln's 1865 promise: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan." These immortal words are VA's motto, and we consider it our sacred mission to provide the very best health care, because you who have served in uniform deserve nothing less.

I'm honored to be with an organization that serves veterans. And I'm proud to work side by side with our great staff and volunteers, many of whom are veterans themselves. November 11 may be the official day to honor American veterans, but every day is Veterans Day at VA.

Michael A. Sabo  
VA Network Director

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<http://www.va.gov/visns/visn03>



## Get your prescriptions online

**Y**ou asked for it, and you got it! You can now use My Health Vet—VA's online service for veterans—to refill your prescriptions and view your prescription history online. To take advantage of this service, you must be a registered user of My Health Vet. As a registered user, you'll also have access to a Personal Health Journal where you can record and track your health statistics online. To register for these important benefits, visit [www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov).

## We're just a phone call away

**Veterans, do you have questions about your health? During weekdays (Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), staff at your VA Medical Center or VA Clinic are available to assist. After 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, weekends, or holidays, call the VA Nurses Helpline at 1-800-877-6976 if you have a medical question. Remember to call 911 at any time if you're having a medical emergency.**

# It's time for your flu shot

## Here's what you need to know about being vaccinated

BY LOIS ANNE KATZ, M.D., AND MEREDITH KING-JENSEN, R.N., M.S.N.

**F**lu is a serious disease. Each year in the United States, about 5 percent to 20 percent of the population gets the flu and about 36,000 people die from it. The single best way to protect against the flu is to get vaccinated each year.

### Who should be vaccinated?

- people ages 50 and older
- anyone with chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease
- anyone at high risk for serious flu complications or people who live with or care for those at high risk
  - health care workers
  - children ages 6 months to 19 years
  - pregnant women

### Who shouldn't be vaccinated?

- people with a severe allergy to chicken eggs

### Questions?

For more information about the flu vaccine, go to [www1.va.gov/visns/visn03/](http://www1.va.gov/visns/visn03/) or [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu).

- those who have had a severe reaction to flu vaccine

### How it works

The flu shot made with killed virus is the vaccine most commonly used by VA. You won't come down with the flu from receiving the vaccine.

A nasal-spray vaccine, which is made from live, weakened flu viruses, is also available. It's only recommended for people ages 2 to 49 and women who aren't pregnant.

The flu vaccine protects against three different flu viruses. Since the viruses change, a new vaccine is prepared each year. For protection against the flu, you need to be vaccinated yearly.

It takes about two weeks after receiving a flu shot to develop antibodies that protect against flu. Side effects are few—soreness, redness or swelling at the site, a low-grade fever or some aches may occur—and usually disappear in one or two days.



### Prevent the spread

**B**esides getting a flu shot, here's how to avoid getting—or spreading—the flu virus:

- Cover your mouth when you cough.
- Wash your hands often.
- Stay home if you get sick.

### Protect yourself

Yearly flu vaccination begins in October and continues until late spring. The best time to get your shot is in October or November. All VA medical centers have the flu vaccine, and most have walk-in flu clinics. The flu vaccine is also available in primary care clinics. Call VA to find out where to get your flu shot. ■



# Let's talk it over

## Focus groups help newest veterans adjust to civilian life

BY JULIANA LAURENZI, M.S.W.

One night every week, 10 veterans being treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder gather to talk about how they've been dealing with life since returning from combat. The VA medical center director and staff from the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Program may join the group during a session. Veterans discuss their care at VA, offer suggestions for improvement and engage in positive banter with the VA staff. This focus group is one way VA reaches out to our newest veterans.

Focus groups are a significant component of the OEF/OIF

Program at each VA Medical Center. New veterans, their spouses or partners and VA staff are encouraged to attend. VA staff welcomes input from service members, and changes to programs have been initiated as a result of feedback from these groups. For example, evening clinics have been added to accommodate veterans who work or attend school during the day.

Each VA Medical Center also hosts a Welcome Home event annually for returning veterans and their families, which may include a job fair or family picnic. Contact your local VA Medical Center or check its Web site for dates and times for these programs. ■

## Brave new world

### VA connects with veterans in cyberspace

VA is reaching out to veterans and their families through the Second Life virtual world at [www.SecondLife.com](http://www.SecondLife.com). Virtual worlds are three-dimensional online spaces that enable people to interact with

each other and their environment through an animated character called an avatar, which is similar to characters used in video games.

Avatars can watch videos, listen to audio, view pictures, participate in presentations before a live audience, link to external Web sites and set up a live conference to communicate with other avatars. The features provide a creative way to access information that's also posted on VA's Web site.

Michael J. Kussman, M.D.,



VA Under Secretary for Health, says the virtual world "provides an imaginative, light-hearted approach to offer veterans who like to go online for information they need and can use."

The Second Life project came about through research VA conducted on how to better connect with veterans through the Internet. ■

### Reality check

For more information about VA's presence in Second Life, visit [www.va.gov/health/VHainSecondLife.asp](http://www.va.gov/health/VHainSecondLife.asp).



# Take it easy

Be good to yourself this holiday season

Regardless of a person's race, ethnicity, culture or religion, the period between Thanksgiving and the New Year is known to most as the "holiday season." While it is often experienced as a joyous time of celebrating with family and friends, for many others the holidays can bring loneliness, depression, anxiety and stress.

Try these coping strategies if you find yourself struggling through the holidays:

- **Take care of you.** You simply can't do everything, so don't overextend yourself. Rest and relaxation should be a priority. Pace yourself. Be careful about what you spend, eat and drink. Keep alcohol use to a minimum. Exercise regularly.

- **Communicate.** Reach out to others and express how you feel. E-mail, call and write letters to loved ones. Stay positive when communicating.

- **Be creative.** Celebrate in your own way, which may be different from how things are usually done. You don't need to be tied to the

past. Do the things you enjoy!

- **Be of service to others.**

Visit a lonely veteran, help out in a food pantry or find some other way to volunteer your time to another.

- **Be realistic.** Know your boundaries. This includes being aware of your financial situation so you don't overspend. Don't expect it to be a happy time for everyone. Plan ahead to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Remember that the holidays last only a short time. Seek help for depression, anxiety or stress. Call or visit your local VA Medical Center, which has expanded services to address your care needs. Best wishes to all veterans and their families for peaceful and healthy holidays! ■

## Help is here

If you need help, call your local VA Medical Center or vet center. If you're in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention toll-free hotline at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**.

## Are you depressed?

Common symptoms of depression include feeling sad, guilty and worthless and having trouble sleeping. There may be physical problems like headaches and digestive disorders. There may also be:

- anger and violent behavior
- weight loss
- trouble concentrating
- isolation from family and friends

- avoidance of pleasurable activities
- fatigue
- alcohol or substance abuse
- thoughts or talk of suicide

If you experience an emotional crisis and need to talk to someone, or if you're thinking about harming yourself, qualified and caring VA professionals are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



George McGinnis draws his bow during the archery competition at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

# Playing to heal

Recreation therapy is more than just fun and games

**W**hen newly injured veteran George McGinnis first arrived at the James J. Peters VA Medical Center (JJPVAMC) as a paraplegic, he had one thing on his mind. “I wanted to get better and get home,” says McGinnis, 62, a burly Vietnam War combat veteran. “Physical therapy was a priority for me at the time; recreational activities weren’t.”

This philosophy is familiar to

**James J. Peters VAMC**

[www.bronx.va.gov](http://www.bronx.va.gov)

Laurel Wright and Molly Heralall, recreation therapists at the Bronx-based JJPVAMC. “Newly injured veterans have a number of very personal issues to deal with,” says Wright. “It’s an emotional process, and when veterans are ready to begin rehabilitation, they don’t always see the value of therapeutic recreation.”

## **A real confidence builder**

Recreation therapy, also referred to as therapeutic recreation, is defined by the U.S. Department of Labor as “a profession of specialists who utilize activities as a form of treatment

for persons who are physically, mentally or emotionally disabled.”

It stands to reason that veterans whose physical limitations are the most obvious difficulty they face might believe that their focus should be on physical therapy. Rehab experts, however, say the healing process is more complex and involves confronting both the physical and the emotional changes that an injured veteran encounters. The more severe the injury, the more significant the benefits of a well-rounded rehabilitation program, which includes recreation therapy.

“Recreation therapy is an integral component of a veteran’s rehabilitation,” explains Adrian Cristian, M.D., Chief of Rehabilitation Medicine at

## “Recreation therapy is an integral component of a veteran’s rehabilitation.”

—Adrian Cristian, M.D.

JJPVAMC. “Through leisure activities and community re-integration, patients learn to adapt to any difficulties they may be experiencing.”

### Getting out again

At the JJPVAMC, recreation therapists work closely with patients whose injuries are often life changing. Working in concert with other rehabilitation specialists, recreation therapists coordinate activities and excursions that help veterans heal by stimulating their social and leisure interests. Offering on-site activities like craft building, billiards and art, they also coordinate numerous off-site excursions for bowling, fishing and other activities.

Wright and Heralall specialize in the treatment of spinal cord injured veterans, arguably some of the most severely injured veterans in the medical system. It’s their mission to help their veteran patients build strength, confidence and self-esteem.

“It’s all about the patient,” says Heralall. “We need to be encouraging and persistent. We can help them see the value in some of the many programs we offer. It sometimes takes a while to get their attention, but once they try us, they usually stick with us.”

### Taking a shot at it

George McGinnis is now a true believer. “Recreational therapy is absolutely essential,” he says. “Without it, I wouldn’t have gotten better as quickly as I did.

“Attitudes can be pretty grim in those early days after an injury,” McGinnis continues. “Rec therapy helps to build camaraderie with your fellow patients. It helps you to get socialized and re-integrated with normal activities and relationships. Maybe most important, it helps you focus on things you can do, as opposed to focusing on

▶ George McGinnis takes aim.

▼ Recreation therapists Molly Heralall (left) and Laurel Wright congratulate George McGinnis on his gold-medal wins.

things you can’t do.”

This year, McGinnis traveled to Omaha, Neb., with a team from JJPVAMC to compete in the 28th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the world.

Competing in archery, air guns and trap shooting, he won two gold medals and a silver. “I’m a survivor and an adapter,” says McGinnis. “They led the way and I did what comes natural—I adapted.” ■



### Play well

To find out more about recreation therapy, go to [www1.va.gov/rectherapy/](http://www1.va.gov/rectherapy/) or [www.atra-online.com/cms/](http://www.atra-online.com/cms/). For more information about the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, go to [www.wheelchairgames.va.gov/](http://www.wheelchairgames.va.gov/).

# Where YOU CAN FIND US—ANYTIME

## **Bronx**

**Medical Center:**  
130 West Kingsbridge Road  
Bronx, NY 10468  
(718) 584-9000

**Community Clinics:**  
23 South Broadway  
White Plains, NY 10601  
(914) 421-1951

124 New Main Street  
Yonkers, NY 10701  
(914) 375-8055

41-03 Queens Boulevard  
Sunnyside, NY 11104  
(718) 741-4800

953 Southern Boulevard  
Bronx, NY 10459  
(718) 741-4900

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## **VA New York Harbor Health Care System**

**Medical Centers:**  
Brooklyn Campus  
800 Poly Place  
Brooklyn, NY 11209  
(718) 836-6600

New York Campus  
423 East 23rd Street  
New York, NY 10010  
(212) 686-7500

VA Primary and Extended  
Care Center  
179th Street & Linden Boulevard  
St. Albans, NY 11425  
(718) 526-1000

**Community Clinics:**  
40 Flatbush Extension—8th Floor  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(718) 439-4300

1150 South Avenue  
3rd Floor—Suite 301  
Staten Island, NY 10314  
(718) 761-2973

55 West 125th Street—11th Floor  
New York, NY 10027  
(646) 273-8125

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## **VA New Jersey Health Care System**

**Medical Centers:**  
East Orange Campus  
385 Tremont Avenue  
East Orange, NJ 07018-1095  
(973) 676-1000

Lyons Campus  
151 Knollcroft Road  
Lyons, NJ 07939  
(908) 647-0180

**Community Clinics:**  
970 Route 70  
Brick, NJ 08724  
(732) 206-8900

654 East Jersey Street—Suite 2A  
Elizabeth, NJ 07206  
(908) 994-0120

171 Jersey Street—Building 36  
Trenton, NJ 08611-2425  
(609) 989-2355

385 Prospect Avenue  
Hackensack, NJ 07601  
(201) 487-1390

115 Christopher Columbus Drive  
Jersey City, NJ 07302  
(201) 435-3055

317 George Street  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
(732) 729-0646

340 West Hanover Avenue  
Morristown, NJ 07960  
(973) 539-9791  
(973) 539-9794

20 Washington Place  
Newark, NJ 07102  
(973) 645-1441

Patterson Army Health Clinic  
Stephenson Avenue—Building 1075  
Fort Monmouth, NJ 07703  
(732) 532-4500

275 Getty Avenue  
Paterson, NJ 07503  
(973) 247-1666

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## **VA Hudson Valley Health Care System**

**Medical Centers:**  
Montrose Campus  
Route 9A/P.O. Box 100  
Montrose, NY 10548-0100  
(914) 737-4400

Castle Point Campus  
Castle Point, NY 12511  
(845) 831-2000

**Community Clinics:**  
Jefferson Professional Plaza  
60 Jefferson Street  
Unit 3  
Monticello, NY 12701  
(845) 791-4936

150 Pike Street  
Port Jervis, NY 12771  
(845) 856-5396

20 Squadron Boulevard—  
Suite 400  
New City, NY 10956  
(845) 634-8942

30 Hatfield Lane—  
Suite 204  
Goshen, NY 10924  
(845) 294-6927

488 Freedom Plains Road  
Poughkeepsie, NY 12603  
(845) 452-5151

1875 Route 6  
Warwick Savings Bank—  
2nd Floor  
Carmel, NY 10512  
(845) 228-5291

2881 Church Street  
Route 199  
Pine Plains, NY 12567  
(518) 398-9240

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## **Northport (Long Island)**

**Medical Center:**  
79 Middleville Road  
Northport, NY 11768  
(631) 261-4400

**Community Clinics:**  
4 Phyllis Drive  
Patchogue, NY 11772  
(631) 758-4419

1425 Old Country Road  
Plainview, NY 11803  
(516) 694-6008

Westhampton Air Base  
(by appointment only)  
150 Old Riverhead Road  
Westhampton, NY 11978  
(631) 898-0599

NY/NJ Veterans Integrated Service  
Network 3  
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VISN Office  
Bronx, NY 10468

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