



Great Lakes VA HEALTHVIEWS

The Newsletter about Health for Veterans in VISN 12



Volume 1, Issue 4

Winter, 2003



The bright colors of fall are all but gone and the holiday season is here. The fourth issue of Great Lakes VA Healthviews features articles written by the staff of the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

Each issue of the newsletter is completely written by one of the seven VA hospitals in VISN 12. Hines, Madison, Iron Mountain and now Milwaukee have each had their turn. If you have not seen staff from YOUR medical center write articles yet, you will!

The advice in our first article, Alcohol and Your Health, is true any time of the year. But it is an important reminder during the holiday season. Our Home Care article also has good year-round advice.

We enjoy answering your questions in "Ask An Expert." In this issue the question relates to constipation – a common problem for many people. If you have a question you would like answered, send it in! The address is listed on the back of the newsletter.

We also appreciate the suggestions you have sent in for future articles. We try to keep the articles general enough to be interesting to readers in all of the seven VA hospitals and clinics. We hope you will understand that we may not cover events or people that apply to only one hospital.

Thank you again for all your great suggestions and compliments.

*Happy Holidays!
The Editorial Staff*

Important Note: Due to limited funding we are NOT able to mail this newsletter to you. It can be found in the waiting rooms of your VA medical center or outpatient clinic. You can also read it on the VISN 12 Website www.vagreatlakes.org. If you have an e-mail address you can subscribe to our online version at the www.vagreatlakes.org site.



Alcohol and Your Health

Gary Barnas, MD
Staff Physician Primary Care

The holiday season is upon us. Remember that alcohol, even in small amounts, can have a negative effect on your health.

Alcohol can:

Slow your brain activity	Decrease your alertness
Slow your reaction time	Interfere with your sleep
Interfere with sexual function	Cause headaches
Raise your blood pressure	Cause heartburn

To avoid these negative effects, it is best to either avoid drinking alcohol or be a “low-risk” drinker.

Do NOT drink alcohol **at all** when you:

- Drive or operate machinery
- Are taking any medicine that reacts with alcohol (for example: heart or blood pressure medicine, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, antihistamines or pain relievers, such as aspirin or acetaminophen or blood thinners)
- Have a medical condition that gets worse when you drink (high blood pressure, atrial fibrillation or arrhythmias, liver disease, ulcers, severe acid reflux, sleep apnea)

What is low-risk drinking?

Men under age 65:	<u>no more</u> than two drinks per day
Women under age 65:	<u>no more</u> than one drink per day
Men and women over age 65:	<u>no more</u> than one drink per day
Everyone:	Don't drink more than five days per week

How much alcohol is “one drink?”



- **12-ounce bottle of beer or**
- **5-ounce glass of wine or**
- **1 1/2-ounce shot of liquor**

Good reasons for drinking less

If I drink within low-risk limits:

- I will sleep better.
- I will save money.
- It may be easier to stay physically fit without the calories from alcohol.
- I will be less likely to feel depressed.
- I will be less likely to die of heart disease or cancer.
- I will be less likely to die of liver disease.
- I will be less likely to die in a car accident.
- Overall, I will be healthier.

What can I do to reduce my drinking?

Most people can stop or reduce their drinking if they want to and are willing to work hard at changing their drinking habits.

Avoid temptation

- Don't keep alcohol at home.
- Stay out of bars and away from people who drink a lot.

Drink slowly

- Sip your drink.
- Take an hour break between drinks.
- Don't drink on an empty stomach.

Take a break from alcohol

- Pick a day or two each week when you don't drink at all.
- Try to stop for a week at a time.

Stay active

- Use the money you would spend on drinking to do something fun with family or friends.

Get support

- Ask your family or friends for help.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about VA programs that can help you stop drinking.

Don't give up!

For more information contact:

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism at www.niaa.nih.gov.
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-729-6686 or www.health.org

The logo features a dark teal house-shaped roof above the word "HOME" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below "HOME" is a horizontal teal bar with a white gradient, containing the words "CARE CORNER" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. A vertical teal bar with a white gradient descends from the left side of the "HOME" text.

HOME CARE CORNER

What Will You Do When the Lights Go Out?

**Dave Van Thiel, MSW, LCSW
Program Manager HBPC**

We live in a time when disaster can strike quickly, with little warning. A disaster plan helps us to be prepared when the basic services we depend on – water, gas, electricity and telephone – are cut off.

According to the American Red Cross, there are six basics you should keep stocked in your home. These will help you get through a disaster. They include: water, food, first aid supplies, clothing and bedding, tools and emergency supplies, and special items.

Here are some tips to help you gather these basic items.

1. Water

- Store one gallon of water per person per day.
- Keep at least a three-day supply of water for each person in your household.
- Store water in plastic containers.

2. Food

- Store at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food.
- Select foods that require no refrigeration, preparation, or cooking, and little or no water.
- Include healthy foods such as canned meats, canned fruits, and canned vegetables.

3. First Aid Kit

- Assemble a first aid kit for both your home and your car.
- Include a variety of adhesive bandages, sterile dressings, gauze pads/rolls, antiseptic wipes, adhesive tape, and other easy to store first aid items.

4. Clothing and Bedding

- Have at least one complete change of clothing per person on hand.
- Include blankets or sleeping bags.
- Also include insulated underwear, warm hat, gloves, and other clothing for harsh weather.

5. Tools and Emergency Supplies – be sure to have the following:

- Mess kit or paper plates, cups and plastic utensils.
- Battery operated radio and extra batteries.
- Flashlight and extra batteries.
- Utility knife or basic tools (can opener, pliers, screwdriver).

6. Special Items – don't forget to include these important items:

- Medicine and medical supplies.
- Dental and denture supplies.
- Extra eyeglasses or contact lenses.
- Games, books and other items for entertainment.

For a complete listing of recommended items, or to receive a free disaster-planning guide, contact your local American Red Cross office or visit them on the web at www.redcross.org.

Did you know

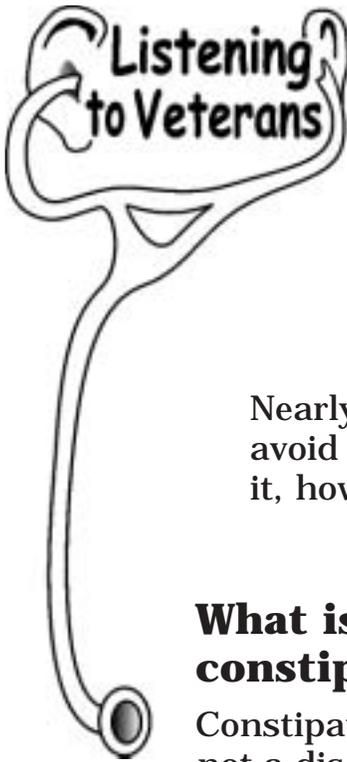
In the **elderly**, the **Flu Shot** has reduced:

- The risk of a hospital stay for **heart disease** by 19%
- The risk of a hospital stay for **stroke** by 16 to 23%
- The risk of a hospital stay for **flu and pneumonia** by 29 to 32%
- The risk of **dying** from ANY cause by 48 to 50%

In **younger people**, the **Flu Shot** has reduced:

- The risk of getting the **flu**
- The use of **sick leave**
- The number of **doctor visits and hospital stays**
- The use of **antibiotics**

It is not too late to get your flu shot! Even getting the flu shot in January or February is helpful. Ask for it at your next visit.



Ask An Expert

“What is constipation? What are some common causes of constipation? Can medicines cause constipation? How can constipation be avoided?”

Nearly everyone becomes constipated at one time or another. To avoid most constipation problems, it helps to know what causes it, how to prevent it, and how to treat it.

What is constipation?

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. You may be constipated if you are having fewer bowel movements than usual. You might find it difficult or painful to have a bowel movement. Older people often worry too much about having a bowel movement every day. There is no right number of daily or weekly bowel movements. Being regular is different for each person.

- Do you often have fewer than three bowel movements each week?
- Do you often have a hard time passing stools?
- Is there pain?
- Are there other problems such as bleeding?

If you answered “yes” to more than one of these questions you may have a constipation problem.

What causes constipation?

- Not drinking enough water can make stool hard and difficult to move. Fluids make bowel movements softer and easier to pass.
- Not having enough fiber in your diet can be a cause. Fiber helps hold water in the stool. Fiber also adds bulk that helps the colon muscles move the stool.
- Medicines that slow down the colon muscles or decrease the amount of water in the colon may cause constipation.
- Lack of exercise may lead to constipation.
- Using laxatives or enemas too often can cause your body to depend on them in order to have a bowel movement.
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement can affect the muscles and nerves that help keep you regular.
- Medical conditions, such as stroke or abnormal colon structure may also be a cause.

What medicines cause constipation?

- Narcotics and pain medicines like codeine, oxycodone, morphine, and propoxyphene can slow the colon muscles.
- Allergy medicines (diphenhydramine or Benadryl®), antidepressants (imipramine, amitriptyline), or diuretics (hydrochlorothiazide, furosemide) decrease the amount of water in the colon.
- Iron supplements dry out the lining of the colon.
- Antacids containing aluminum are binding.

How do I avoid constipation?

- Don't overuse stimulant laxatives (for example, Correctol®, Dulcolax®, Purge®, Senokot®) and enemas. One exception is people on strong pain medicine who may need laxatives like senna to keep their bowels moving.
- Stool softeners like docusate or bulk laxatives like psyllium (Metamucil®) help prevent constipation.
- Drink plenty of liquids -- eight (8 ounce) glasses a day. People with congestive heart failure may need to restrict their fluids.

- Go to the bathroom when you have the urge. Develop a bowel routine allowing time after breakfast or supper to use the bathroom.
- Get some form of exercise daily. Walking or chair exercises help keep your bowels moving.
- Eat high fiber food, such as fresh and dried fruits, vegetables, bran, beans, whole grains. Avoid eating a lot of cheese, sugary sweets, eggs, and high-fat meats.
- Take your medicine as directed. Talk to your pharmacist or healthcare provider before taking over-the-counter products for constipation or loose stools.

For more information about constipation:

The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse
1-800-891-5389 or
www.niddk.nih.gov

National Institute on Aging,
1-800-222-2225 or www.nia.nih.gov

Answered by:
Sandra Fetzler, RPh
Registered Pharmacist

Your best source for information on your health will always be your doctor or health care provider. We hope this newsletter will encourage you to talk to your health care provider and ask questions about your health concerns.

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**Main Phone Numbers
for VISN 12 Hospitals**

Hines: 708-202-VETS (8387)

Iron Mountain: 906-774-3300

Madison: 608-256-1901

Milwaukee: 414-384-2000
or 1-888-469-6614

North Chicago: 1-800-393-0865
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1-800-872-8662
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**“Ask An Expert” Question
or Idea for Future Articles**

Do you have an “Ask An Expert” question or an idea for a future article? Your ideas can be e-mailed, mailed, or faxed to the Senior Editor.

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