

September 16, 2010

**SMOKING CESSATION BENEFIT FOR VHA EMPLOYEES: NO-COST PROVISION
OF NICOTINE REPLACEMENT THERAPY**

1. PURPOSE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive provides policy for the provision of free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) over-the-counter (OTC) medications to employees in VHA who seek assistance with quitting smoking as part of VHA's core preventive health mission. *NOTE: This Directive serves as a supplement to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Directive 5019, "Occupational Health Services." The procedures contained herein will be incorporated into VA Handbook 5019 as an appendix.*

2. BACKGROUND

a. Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the United States, despite the availability of effective and readily available interventions, such as NRT. *NOTE: NRT is a highly effective smoking cessation intervention and treatment with a well-proven safety record.* Given the health impacts of smoking, tobacco cessation counseling is an integral component of VHA's health promotion and disease prevention programs. While VHA health care professionals continue to provide employee smoking cessation counseling, they requested guidance and policy from the Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards on providing free NRT to employees who desire to quit smoking.

b. In 2008, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted an increase in health care expenditures and productivity losses associated with tobacco use. All types of tobacco are known to cause serious health impacts. Tobacco dependence is a chronic disease that often requires repeated intervention and multiple attempts to quit. Although 70 percent of smokers report trying to quit, only 40 percent report success with quitting smoking, and only about 20 percent of those who attempt to quit report use of medication or counseling to assist with quitting.

c. A recent Cochrane review of NRT for smoking cessation concluded that NRTs increase the rate of cessation by 50-70 percent, regardless of the setting. NRT, in the forms of a nicotine patch, gum or lozenge, is the most commonly used smoking cessation medication. These medications have a long history of prescribed use with a well-documented safety record that has led to some NRT products being approved for OTC use (OTC refers to products being available without a prescription).

d. VHA is a national leader in health promotion and disease prevention. Providing free OTC NRT as part of ongoing smoking cessation efforts for employees, as a health promotion and disease prevention initiative, is consistent with VHA's central health care mission and goal of being an employer of choice. Providing OTC NRT makes additional assistance available to employees trying to quit tobacco use. This employee health initiative in smoking cessation is also moving ahead to decrease harmful exposures to secondhand smoke.

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e. Smoking cessation counseling and prescription medication are covered through some, but not all Federal Employee Health Benefit (FEHB) plans. OTC NRTs are not covered by FEHB plans. Given the efficacy of NRT in smoking cessation and noting its safety record, the smoking cessation benefit provides for OTC NRT to employees requesting NRT. Non-NRT and prescription-only NRT smoking cessation medications need to be prescribed by the employee's physician, as these medications require close follow-up and monitoring for adverse events.

f. VA's Office of General Counsel has advised that the definition of preventive health services for employees, as defined under title 5 U.S.C. 7901, includes smoking cessation counseling and medications. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has determined that Federal agencies may use appropriated funds to provide NRT at no cost to employees.

g. The recent Institute of Medicine Report, "Combating Tobacco Use in Military and Veteran Population," recommended that, as part of a comprehensive tobacco control program, both the Department of Defense and VA provide barrier-free access to smoking cessation treatment, including NRT to assist employees who want to quit tobacco use.

h. A number of VA medical centers have successfully implemented policies to provide free OTC NRT for employees who are seeking assistance with quitting smoking. These include:

- (1) Providing free OTC NRT purchased by VA;
- (2) Providing OTC NRT through an outside vendor;
- (3) Providing free OTC NRT through existing employee health clinics;
- (4) Providing free OTC NRT through existing facility tobacco cessation programs;
- (5) Providing vouchers for purchasing OTC NRT through VA canteens; and

(6) Contracting with state or private telephone counseling quitlines for services, including OTC NRT.

i. Current VHA Employee Health Promotion data, from Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 23, suggest the costs of providing OTC NRT to employees are expected to be between \$100,000 and \$150,000 per year. The benefits, in recouped sick leave and improved role-modeling for employees, are substantial and far outweigh the cost (see Att. A for relative cost on select brand patch, gum and lozenge medications, and prescribing guidelines in accordance with 2008 public Health Service Clinical Practice Guidelines and Pharmacy Benefits Management [PBM] policy).

3. POLICY: It is VHA policy to provide free OTC formulations of NRT in appropriate combinations of the nicotine patch, gum and lozenge to employees who are seeking assistance with quitting smoking as part of preventive health initiatives for employees. The original prescription may include refills for multiple courses as determined appropriate by the provider.

4. ACTION

a. **VISN Director.** Each VISN Director is responsible for ensuring that VISN and facility policies comply with this Directive regarding the provision of OTC forms of NRT to employees.

b. **Facility Director.** Each facility Director is responsible for ensuring:

(1) A facility policy providing free OTC NRT is developed, published, and implemented in accordance with this Directive and is consistent with VHA's established drug accountability procedures.

(2) The provision of free OTC NRT is incorporated into smoking cessation programs for employees as part of employee health promotion and disease prevention programs or existing smoking cessation services in the facility. Employees may obtain this free benefit by requesting prescription orders for OTC NRT from the Employees Health Office (see subpar. 4b[3]).

(3) That the Employees' Health Office or other authorized provider (as defined in local facility policy) issues employee prescriptions for OTC NRT to be dispensed by VA Pharmacies.

(4) OTC NRT is made available to all VHA employees who are attempting to quit tobacco use.

(5) OTC NRT is free of charge or co-payment.

(6) OTC NRT is made available to any requesting employee at the worksite or is mailed to the employee's home.

5. REFERENCES

a. Title 5 U.S.C. § 7901(c).

b. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Smoking- Attributable Mortality, Years of Potential Life Lost, and Productivity Losses - United States, 2002-2004," Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR). 57(45), 1226-1228: 2008.

c. Fiore MC, Jaen CR, Baker TB, et al. "Treating tobacco use and dependence: 2008 update. Clinical practice guideline." Rockville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service; 2008. Available at http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/tobacco/treating_tobacco_use08.pdf.

d. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Cigarette Smoking Among Adults - United States, 2007," MMWR. 57(45), 1221-1226: 2008.

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e. Institute of Medicine. Combating Tobacco Use in Military and Veteran Populations. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2009.

6. FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITY: The Strategic Health Group for Occupational Health, Safety and Prevention (13D) and the Public Health Strategic Health Care Group (13B) are responsible for VHA programs related to this Directive. Questions can be directed to (612) 467-4589.

7. RESCISSION: None. This VHA Directive expires September 30, 2015.

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Under Secretary for Health

DISTRIBUTION: E-mailed to the VHA Publications Distribution List 9/17/2010

ATTACHMENT A

TABLE FOR USE BY THE NICOTINE REPLACEMENT THERAPY (NRT)
EMPLOYEE



smoking table for
NRT Employee...