

Office of Health Equity

Veterans Health Administration

Department of Veterans Affairs



INCREASING HEALTH LITERACY TO ACHIEVE HEALTH EQUITY IN OLDER VETERANS

Lauren Korshak, DHealth(c), MS, ACSM-CEP, Office of Health Equity, Chelsea Hawley PharmD, MPH, VA Bedford, Rachel Chandra, PharmD, MPH, FASHP, VA Dayton Health Care

INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is increasingly racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA health care mission. The Office of Health Equity (OHE) champions the elimination of health disparities to achieve health equity for all Veterans.

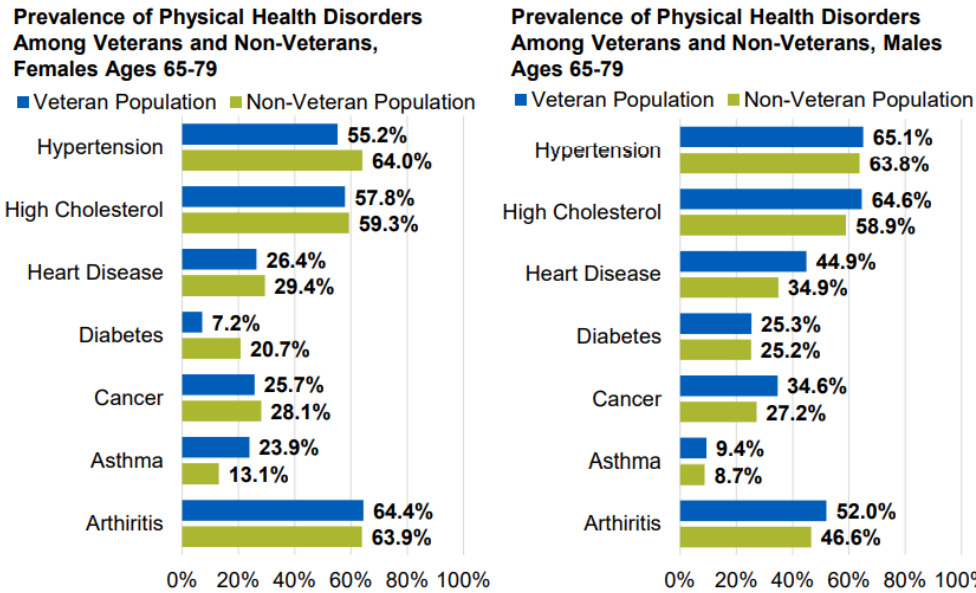
VA’s Geriatrics and Extended Care providers utilize the Patient Priorities Care (PCC) approach. It is meant to be a collaboration between Veterans, their caregivers, and their VA clinicians. These resources can help Veterans identify their priorities, talk with their VA providers and loved ones about them, and make decisions together about getting the most benefit from their health care

ELIMINATING DISPARITIES

Health literacy is the ability to obtain and understand health information provided by their health care providers that allows someone to be able to manage their health condition(s). Health literacy is important because if patients and providers cannot communicate with each other in a way they both understand individuals may ultimately suffer poorer health outcomes.

Older adults are more likely to have lower health literacy and they are more likely to have multiple chronic health conditions.

Prevalence of Physical Health Disorders Among Older Veterans and Non-Veterans



From Chartbook on Healthcare for Veterans, AHRQ and VA’s Office of Health Equity, November 2020

PROMOTING HEALTH LITERACY

The Office of Health Equity supports efforts across VA to ensure that Veterans have access to important health information so that they can achieve their optimal health. These efforts aim to simplify complex health information and empower Veterans to seek out health information that can help them play an active role in their health care.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: TAILORING “WHAT MATTERS MOST” CONVERSATIONS TO OLDER VETERANS WITH LOW HEALTH LITERACY

The Office of Health Equity supports clinicians at the VA Bedford Healthcare System in Massachusetts who are working to adapt the Patient Priorities Care approach to address the specific needs of older Veterans who have low health literacy.

In their pilot, researchers at VA Bedford met with 7 Veterans who were 74-91 years old and had had a range of education levels: did not finish high school (1), finished high school only (4), finished high school and trade school (1), and finished law school (1). All Veterans had cognitive changes that interfered with their daily life and six of 7 Veterans attended the visit with a caregiver or family member.

The researchers learned that there are multiple ways family caregivers may aid in the expression of patient priorities and alignment of priorities to patient’s life routines. Family caregivers facilitated PPC conversations by aiding Veterans’ comprehension through strategies such as rewording a question to the patient and pointing out to clinical team when the patient does not comprehend a word/question.

They also found that family caregivers benefit from hearing patients expressing their enduring values and priorities, so the family caregivers may take concrete steps to honor these values and priorities. Family caregivers at times had competing priorities or differing priorities than the Veteran, related to what is realistic, feasible, or safe for the Veteran at this time. Using what they learned from this pilot, they have begun to create a conversation guide that VA health care providers can use when working with older Veterans who may have low health literacy.



For more information about VA’s Geriatrics and Extended Care Patient Priorities Care (PCC), visit: https://www.va.gov/geriatrics/pages/making_decisions.asp

For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit: <https://www.va.gov/healthequity/>