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Issue #10- April 2024

# WOMEN VETERAN HEALTH NEWS

VA SAN DIEGO HEALTHCARE SYSTEM



## Expanded In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) Services for Veterans

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently announced that In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) services will be expanded:

- Eligible Veterans can now use donor eggs, sperm, and embryos for ART/IVF at their own expense.
- Services will be expanded to include eligible unmarried Veterans and eligible Veterans in same-sex marriages.
  - VA does not have the legal authority to treat non-Veterans who are not the legal spouse of the Veteran with infertility.
- VA is not authorized to cover Gestational Surrogacy

Veterans must have a service-connected condition or treatment that is causing their infertility diagnosis. Veterans who don't have a service-connected condition may still qualify for other infertility services listed below:

- Infertility assessments and counseling
- Laboratory testing
- Imaging services such as ultrasounds and X-rays
- Hormonal therapies
- Surgical correction
- Genetic counseling and testing
- Fertility medications
- Artificial and intrauterine insemination

Speak with your VA health care provider to learn more about infertility services.



## Introducing >> Julie Kangas, Ph.D. Women's Mental Health Champion



Julie Kangas, Ph.D. is one of our facility's Women's Mental Health Champions, Clinic Coordinator for general mental health outpatient services at Kearny Mesa, and Lead Psychologist for Eating Disorders Treatment. She co-leads a group called *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Eating Disorders* with an Eating Disorders specialty dietitian. The most recent addition to our eating disorders services is a one-time informational session on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday of every month, where Veterans can learn about the symptoms and significance of eating disorders, how military service increases the risk of developing an eating disorder, and how the VA can support treatment goals.

In addition to being a licensed clinical psychologist, she is a certified yoga teacher and certified compassion meditation teacher. She is currently involved with research studies that apply yoga and meditation practices as treatments for mental and physical illness. She serves as the Co-Director of the Advanced Fellowship for Women's Health and teaches doctoral and post-doctoral candidates in clinical psychology.

One of the tasks of a Women's Mental Health Champion is to identify gaps in women Veteran's mental health access and services. **If you an idea about mental health services you think would be helpful to women Veteran's, please share that with her by calling 619-400-5174.**

# Understanding Eating Disorders

An **eating disorder** is a serious mental health condition where unhealthy eating patterns can increase your risk for health problems, including life-threatening issues. You cannot tell if someone has an eating disorder just by the way they look. Eating disorders can affect people of any age, shape, size, race, ethnicity, or gender. [Eating disorder symptoms](#) look different for everyone and may include:

- **Restricting:** Severely limiting food to the point of being undernourished (i.e., anorexia). This can include not eating enough, limiting certain types of food, and following strict eating rules.
- **Binging:** Eating a large amount of food in a short time (such as two hours). You may feel like you can't stop yourself from eating, you may try to hide how much you eat, and you may feel shame or regret later.
- **Compensating:** Getting rid of calories or "undoing" a binge. This may include forcing yourself to vomit (i.e., bulimia), exercising excessively (and exercising while sick or injured), and misusing laxatives, diuretics, insulin, or thyroid medications.

You should not assume someone has an eating disorder based on the way they look, but understanding certain behaviors may help you identify whether a loved one is struggling. These may include:

- Skipping meals or leaving during/right after a meal to use the bathroom
- Hiding meals or eating in secret
- Having a very limited diet that wasn't prescribed by a medical professional
- Frequently checking body in the mirror
- Withdrawing from social activities

## Health Effects and Veteran Risk Factors

Early detection is key in avoiding long-term potentially life-threatening issues. Eating disorders not only affect your mental health but can have [extreme effects on your physical health](#), including (but not limited to):

- Fertility issues
- Significant weight loss
- Thinning bones, anemia, muscle wasting, and weakness
- Brittle hair and nails, yellowing skin, or fine hair growth all over body
- Constipation
- Low blood pressure, slowed breathing and pulse, and damage to your heart
- Lethargy, sluggishness, or feeling tired and cold all the time
- Sore throat, swollen glands, decaying teeth, severe dehydration, and electrolyte imbalance (which can lead to stroke or heart attack) from purging or vomiting often

Women are more likely than men to experience eating disorders and Veterans are at an increased risk. Some aspects of your military service may increase your risk, including:

- Being exposed to trauma, such as military sexual trauma (MST), or having posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Unpredictable eating schedules, such as going long periods without eating, eating too quickly, and having less variety of food available
- Pressure to "make weight" during service and emphasis on measurement and weight standards

Other factors may increase your risk outside your military service, including family medical history, other mental health issues, chronic or "yo-yo" dieting, a history of being bullied due to weight, and more.

## Resources and Treatment

If you're concerned about unhealthy eating patterns, the first step is to contact your VA primary care or mental health clinician. They can help you identify whether your eating is problematic and guide you to the best resources for you, including possible VA outpatient treatment, as well as higher levels of care, if needed. If you don't currently have a primary care provider, contact the Women Veterans Program Manager at your [local VA](#) or call/text the Women Veterans Call Center at 1-855-VA-WOMEN to connect to care.

## UNDERSTANDING EATING DISORDERS



### Eating disorders affect many Veterans.

Experiences such as trauma, unpredictable eating schedules, or the pressure to "make weight" can increase your risk of an eating disorder.



### Any body, no matter age, race, shape, size, or gender, can experience disordered eating - however, women are at higher risk.

Eating disorders can look different for everyone and may include restricting, bingeing, exercising excessively, or misusing medications.



### VA can help connect you to care.

VA can connect you to dietitians, therapists, primary care providers, and outpatient or residential programs to help you identify unhealthy behaviors and receive treatment.



### Eating disorders are treatable.

If you're concerned about eating disorders, talk with your VA health care provider to connect to the care you need.

WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE  
\*\*\* You Can Trust

1-855-VA-WOMEN  
[www.womenshealth.va.gov](http://www.womenshealth.va.gov)



## Learning how to manage stress or building a healthier lifestyle can also help with eating disorders

- VA offers [Whole Health resources](#) which can help you develop a plan based on your needs – including overall wellness and lifestyle.
- [VA's Nutrition and Food Services](#) is available to connect you to [dietitians](#) who can review your personal eating habits, explain how food and lifestyle choices impact your health, and develop a personalized nutrition plan just for you.
- If you're a Veteran currently struggling to afford food and the nutrition you need, you may be eligible for benefits and services that can connect you to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food through the [VHA Food Security Office](#).
- For Veterans who would like to learn more about making healthy food choices, VA also provides [healthy cooking classes](#) and resources to get you on track.

For more information, visit our [VA Women's Health Disordered Eating page](#) and listen to [this She Wears the Boots podcast episode](#).

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*In this She Wears the Boots podcast episode, we dive into the facts and myths about eating disorders in Veterans and VA's treatment options for those seeking care.*

*Listen now: [www.spreaker.com/episode/eating-disorders--50722618](http://www.spreaker.com/episode/eating-disorders--50722618).*

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## ARE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

Creating a safety plan now can help you identify coping strategies and sources of support in a future crisis. Give suicidal thoughts time to decrease and become more manageable by having a list of:

- Warning signs that you may be headed toward crisis
- Ways you can cope on your own
- Distractions (places to go and people to call)
- Friends and family to call when you need help
- Professionals to call when you're in a crisis
- Ways to limit access to dangerous objects and keep yourself safe

Create a plan with your VA health care team or download the VA Safety Plan app at [mobile.va.gov/app/safety-plan](http://mobile.va.gov/app/safety-plan).



# Whole Health is everywhere – get connected!

## April is Whole Health Month

Come visit us on *Wellness Wednesday* to find out how to start YOUR Whole Health journey!

**When:** April 3<sup>rd</sup> 10am-1pm

**Where:** Oceanside Clinic

**When:** April 10<sup>th</sup> 10am-1pm

**Where:** Chula Vista Clinic

**When:** April 10<sup>th</sup> 10am-1pm

**Where:** Sorrento Valley

**When:** April 17<sup>th</sup> 10am-1pm

**Where:** Kearny Mesa Clinic

**When:** April 24<sup>th</sup> 10am-1pm

**Where:** La Jolla VA Multi-purpose room



Stop by and learn about Whole Health, an approach to care that centers around what matters to YOU. Your San Diego health care team wants to get to know you as a person, and help you develop a personalized health plan based on your values, needs and goals.

Email the VA SD Women's Health team:

[SDCVAMCWomensHealth@va.gov](mailto:SDCVAMCWomensHealth@va.gov)

This email is provided for informational purposes only. Do not communicate any individually-identifying information or your protected health information via email as VHA will not reply back due to privacy concerns. Veterans are encouraged to use Secure Messaging that is available through MyHealtheVet.

SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS AND PREVENTION MONTH

Finding *your path* to healing

Healing from military sexual trauma looks different for everyone.



Scan to find support and learn more at [MentalHealth.va.gov/MST](http://MentalHealth.va.gov/MST)



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New number, same support.  
Dial 988 then Press 1.

