



Veterans health picture differs

Learn risks associated with service to hold providers accountable

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"This is it. This is where my life ends," rushed through my mind. "I'm only 40 years old and I am dying."

Then panic set in.

"Oh my gosh! Who is going to raise my kids? How will my husband ever survive without me? And why didn't I put better underwear on this morning"

There I was, in the ER, working myself into a bit of a frenzy.

felt as if my lungs had been filled with concrete instead of oxygen. Drawing in a breath took all the focus I had and caused radiating pain throughout my chest. I found myself taking short, shallow breaths, almost panting like a woman horribly failing in her Lamaze class, and mentally writing out my

last will and testament.

"I leave to my daughter, my vintage my little pony set. To my son, my brand new Huffy street rider bicycle, which I know he covets. My husband gets my favorite pair of underwear, which I wish I had on right now, and the promise that I will haunt him until his dying day if he ever remarries"

I kept watching the door and waiting for the administration officer to tell me insurance was not going to cover my visit.

You see, I was there against the advice of the 1-800 nurse hotline you call before going to the ER.

When I had called and described my symptoms, the nurse casually said, "It's probably just heartburn. Did you eat anything new or spicy?"

"Uh, no."

"Oh, well. Just roll your window down and you will feel better, honey."

It was like getting advice from a well intentioned great aunt rather than a medical professional. But the pain did not go away and only got worse. So, into the ER I went.

At the ER, I was given an EKG. The EKG appeared to be within normal ranges.

The doctor didn't seem all that concerned, and he began talking about sending me home.

I told him, "I am an Army veteran."

He responded with, "Thank you for your service," and limply shook my hand.

There was this awkward silence as I waited for him to say something more. Only, there was no more. He just smiled and released my hand.

That's when it hit me that like a surprisingly high amount of health care providers, this doctor may not know that, as a woman veteran, I am five times more likely to have heart disease.

So, I told him about my risk and highly recommended he run a few more tests.

He wisely decided to order an x-ray and CT scan.

Turned out, I had a horrible case of pneumonia.

Had I not mentioned my service and held my healthcare provider accountable,

I might have gone home and not only gotten sicker, but passed the disease onto my family.

I share this to demonstrate how important it is for veterans to know the healthcare risks associated with service and communicate with their healthcare providers about those risks.

Have you had a conversation with your healthcare providers about your military service?

Do they know you have served or are presently serving in the US military?

There is a very good chance they do not know the health risks that are associated with your military service beyond gunshot wounds and PTSD.

According to a 2018 Rand study, only around 2% of doctors participated in any kind of military or veteran-centric training prior to setting up their practice. And until health care providers are mandated to be well versed in military and veteran-centric healthcare, the burden currently falls on service members, veterans, and their families to inform their health care providers about their military service and any health issues that may be of concern.

The difference between health risks for civilians and military service members and veterans varies greatly.



For example, U.S. Preventative Services Task Force (USPSTF), an independent volunteer panel of non-governmental experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine who make recommendations based on reviews and assessments of research, recently released new recommendations on prostate cancer screening. Their most recent recommendation is that men over the age of 70 no longer be screened for prostate cancer because the patient is more at risk from the process of being screened than from the cancer itself.

The USPSTF recognized three major risk factors: age, race, and family history. However, Vietnam veterans exposed

ABOVE: Maureen Elias poses during her time in the Army.

RIGHT: The Elias family could have faced serious consequences if Maureen had not informed a health care provider that her veteran status puts her at higher risk of certain diseases during an ER visit.



Submitted Photos



to Agent Orange are more likely than their civilian counterparts to acquire prostate cancer, and the cancer is more likely to be a rapidly growing, aggressive form of cancer.

Healthcare providers generally follow the recommendations of the USPSTF, so unless a veteran identifies their risk and why they may still need to be screened after the age of 70, the healthcare provider might risk missing the cancer, and possibly risk the loss of life of the veteran because the cancer was not caught in an early stage.

There are over 4.7 million rural veterans. These veterans face health care challenges that are unique to the rural veteran population. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Rural Health, compared to urban areas, rural communities tend to have higher rates of poverty, a higher number of elderly residents, poorer health among residents, and less available healthcare services. Rural communities also tend to have less housing, education, employment, and transportation options. There is less access to broadband internet, higher rates of uninsurance, and greater geographic and distance barriers. These factors mean less access and services for rural veterans. This also means a greater chance of seeing a provider who is not well versed in military and veteran centric health, making it even more important for rural veterans to educate their providers about their health risks and environmental exposures.

Until university medical schools and colleges provide education courses on military and veteran-centric healthcare, the burden falls on us, service members, veterans, and our families to inform our health care providers about our service and what health concerns we might have due to our military service. It is also not safe to assume your VA Choice healthcare provider knows all of your healthcare risks as they are currently not mandated to have any military or veteran centric healthcare training. There are four important pieces of information to share with your health care provider: a) What branch you served in; b) When you served; c) Where you served; and d) What your MOS (job) was in the service. The answers can provide a wealth of epidemiological information, particularly in the area of environmental exposures.

It is essential to your health that you begin and continue having conversations with your healthcare providers. Hold them accountable to know your health risks and environmental exposures you may have had during your military service. Educate them about those health risks, and you may end up saving your life and possibly that of your brother or sister in arms.

LEARN, TEACH, SAVE

There are some great websites out there with information to educate yourself and share with your healthcare providers.

- **Veteranshealth.net** has information on **multiple generations of veteran health information.**
- **You can refer your healthcare providers to the Office of Academic Affiliations webpage, which gives informational questions to ask. Go to <https://www.va.gov/oaa/pocketcard/unique.asp>**
- **The Department of Veterans Affairs website is rich with information on veteran health, but it can be tricky to navigate.**
- **For exposure related health concerns, visit <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/health-concerns.asp>**
- **For diseases and conditions, go to <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/diseases-conditions.asp>**
- **For health and wellness, log onto <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/health-wellness.asp>**
- **A page specifically for providers on Military Exposures we recommend is <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/providers/index.asp>**
- **The American Academy of Nursing recently developed and is implementing an awareness campaign for healthcare providers called "Have you Ever Served?" Their webpage (www.haveyoueverserved.com) has information for health professionals and resources for veterans.**

Protect Essential Veterans' Phone Services

The Lifeline program was created by the Reagan Administration to provide low-income Americans with access to affordable phone services.

Lifeline Today:

1.3 MILLION VETERANS RELY ON LIFELINE

12% OF LIFELINE SUBSCRIBERS ARE VETERANS

Lifeline connects veterans with opportunity and lifesaving resources, including:

- ✓ **Jobs**
- ✓ **Healthcare & Emergency Services**
- ✓ **Education**
- ✓ **Suicide Prevention Resources**

Proposed changes in DC will damage the ability of low-income Americans – including 1.3 million veterans – to access essential phone services. If the proposed changes are enacted:

- 8.3 million Americans will lose access to their current phone services
- Up to 85% of Lifeline subscribers will be unable to afford phone services
- Basic phone service costs will increase while service quality plummets
- Veterans in need & other qualified Americans will be barred from the program

ACT NOW TO PROTECT VETERANS' LIFELINE TO OPPORTUNITY

Text **VETERANS** to **52886**

or go to

VETS.LIFELINEFACTS.COM

