

Complementary and alternative medicine for veterans and military personnel

November 17 2014

A growing body of research evidence shows that complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has health benefits for US military veterans and active duty personnel, according to a special December supplement to *Medical Care*.

The special issue presents new studies and commentaries on the benefits and increasing use of CAM techniques in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and other [military](#) health settings. "The papers in this supplement represent promising steps to improve the health of [veterans](#) and active [military personnel](#)," according to an introductory article by Guest Editors Stephanie L. Taylor, PhD, of Greater Los Angeles VA Healthcare System and A. Rani Elwy, PhD, of Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital, Bedford, Mass. "They mirror the countless stories we hear from veterans and their providers about the positive effect that CAM is having on their lives."

Studies Show Value of CAM for Improving Health of Military Personnel

The supplement presents 14 original studies reporting on specific CAM therapies and on the current use, perceptions, and acceptance of CAM in veterans and current military personnel. The special issue of *Medical Care* is sponsored by the VHA's Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation.

Complementary and alternative medicine therapies are increasingly available, used, and appreciated by military patients, according to Drs Taylor and Elwy. They cite statistics showing that CAM programs are now offered at nearly 90 percent of VA medical facilities. Use CAM modalities by veterans and active military personnel is as at least as high as in the general population.

Previous systematic reviews have reported benefits of CAM treatments for many of the important problems seen in military populations, including chronic pain, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression. Those prior results suggest that CAM therapies are "moderately effective" for these conditions—although these conclusions must be weighed against the weaknesses of the evidence base.

Highlights of the research included in the special issue include:

- Studies reporting benefits of specific types of meditation practices. One study finds that a mindfulness-based intervention reduced depression and improved psychological well-being in veterans with PTSD. A study of mindfulness-based stress reduction for veterans shows reductions in anxiety and depression, as well as suicidal thoughts.
- A report showing beneficial effects of acupuncture for veterans with PTSD. In addition to reduced severity of PTSD symptoms, the study shows improvements in depression, pain, and physical and mental health functioning. Another study finds that most veterans use vitamins and nutritional supplements, often substituting them for prescription drugs.
- Studies showing high rates of use and favorable perceptions found of CAM modalities among veterans of the Gulf War and Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom. Veterans with PTSD are more likely to be accepting of CAM therapies.
- Reports describing the rates and preferred types of CAM mind-

body and other modalities among military members and veterans, as well as on health care providers' attitudes toward CAM. While VA providers vary in their knowledge of CAM, many perceive benefits for their patients.

A commentary by Laura P. Krejci, MSW, and colleagues of the VA's Office of Patient Centered Care & Cultural Transformation discusses the role of CAM in meeting the "number one strategic priority" of providing "personalized, proactive, patient-driven [health care](#) to veterans." Dr Wayne B. Jonas and colleagues of the Samueli Institute, Alexandria, Va., draw attention to several bodies of research on CAM in the US military. They conclude that current policy and priorities leave "the majority of active duty service members, veterans, and their families to fend for themselves, to pay for or go without the beneficial effects of CAM and integrative medicine practices."

While the studies in the special issue show progress, Drs Taylor and Elwy stress the need for additional rigorous research to better understand CAM's potential for managing important conditions seen in military populations. They conclude, "It is time for more funding to be awarded to CAM ...to improve the capacity of the field to carry out rigorous CAM research, which in turn will benefit veterans and military personnel, as well as the general population."

More information: "Building the Evidence Base for Complementary and Integrative Medicine Use among Veterans and Military Personnel." journals.lww.com/lww-medicalcare/toc/2014/12001

Provided by Wolters Kluwer Health

Citation: Complementary and alternative medicine for veterans and military personnel (2014,

November 17) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-complementary-alternative-medicine-veterans-military.html>

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