

Lifestyle behaviors key to post-deployment health of veterans

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A new study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* finds that the lifestyle of veterans both pre- and post-deployment influences their post-deployment wellness.

Previous research has shown that U.S. service members are usually healthier than the general population. The new study shows that wellness of veterans was associated with modifiable lifestyle behaviors such as physical activity, strength training, smoking abstinence and healthy BMI. However, the stress associated with deployment, especially combat, can result in reduced mental health, including [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) and a negative sense of well-being.

Lead author Melissa Bagwell, MPH, with colleagues at the Department of Deployment Health Research at the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego, CA, utilized questionnaire data of 10,228 veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan, collected as part of the Millennium Cohort Study. The Millennium Cohort Study, an ongoing longitudinal study of more than 150,000 participants, is designed to evaluate long-term health effects of military service, including deployments. It is the largest population-based prospective [health](#) project in U.S. military history.

The researchers evaluated a wide range of factors that potentially predicted post-deployment wellness, including both non-modifiable and modifiable factors. The non-modifiable pre-deployment factors included having a disease, life stressors, demographics, and military-specific characteristics, such as service branch and occupation.

Modifiable pre-deployment factors included mental disorders, self-reported height and weight and body mass index (BMI), behaviors like smoking and drinking, plus use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

The authors concluded that people who had experienced combat and had more cumulative days of deployment had lower post-deployment wellness status. However, combat specialists, whether or not they experienced combat, had increased odds of wellness, perhaps because they were more mentally prepared and physically fit, said the researchers. In addition, Air Force and Navy/Coast Guard personnel were more likely to be well post-deployment than those in the Army.

"[The authors] address an important research question using an excellent data source," said Gregory G. Homish, Ph.D. at The State University of New York at Buffalo. "Importantly, they consider several dimensions of [wellness](#) along with modifiable risk factors. Although understanding non-

modifiable risk factors is important, these factors do not give us an opportunity to identify potential prevention and treatment strategies as they can't be changed. Thus, the inclusion of modifiable [risk factors](#) in this study can provide data that can potentially be used to inform prevention strategies."

More information: Bagnell, M. et al. 2013. The Association of Predeployment and Deployment-Related Factors on Dimensions of Postdeployment Wellness in U.S. Military Service Members, *American Journal of Health Promotion*. Vol. 28, No. 2.

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