

Many Veterans Need Mental Health Care

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Those returning from Iraq may not show sign of problems right away, study notes

THURSDAY, July 16 (HealthDay News) -- More than 40 percent of the U.S. soldiers from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars seen at VA hospitals suffer from mental health disorders or psychosocial behavioral problems, a new study shows.

Curiously, the researchers from the San Francisco VA Medical Center found that most mental health diagnoses were not made in the first year that a veteran entered the VA health-care system, but several years after. This finding supports the recent move to extend VA benefits to five years of free health care, which allows VA doctors the time to detect and treat more mental illness in returning combat veterans, the researchers noted.

"After the start of the Iraq War, there is a growing burden of mental illness, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that will require increased allocation of resources for better detection and early intervention to prevent chronic mental illness, which threatens individual veterans, their families and communities," said lead researcher Dr. Karen Seal, an assistant professor of medicine and psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco.

The report is published in the July 16 online edition of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

For the study, Seal's team collected data on 289,328 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who sought health care at VA medical centers from 2002 to 2008.

Among these returning vets, 106,726 were given mental health care. These included 62,929 diagnosed with PTSD and 50,432 diagnosed with depression. That's nearly 37 percent of veterans, the authors noted.

"When the definition is expanded to include diagnoses of mental health disorders or psychosocial behavioral problems such as homelessness, or both, 43 percent of these veterans received these diagnoses," Seal added.

The diagnoses included 22 percent with PTSD, 17 percent with depression, 7 percent with alcohol use disorder, and 3 percent with drug use disorder. Many vets had several of these problems. In fact, 29 percent of veterans with mental health problems were diagnosed with two different conditions, and 33 percent were diagnosed with three or more, Seal said.

In addition, women had a higher risk for depression, but men had more than twice the risk for drug use problems, the researchers found.

Since the start of the Iraq war, mental health problems increased more than fourfold among active-duty personnel and sevenfold for members of the National Guard or Reserve, Seal said.

Aoe also played a role in the risk for PTSD. Seal said. While

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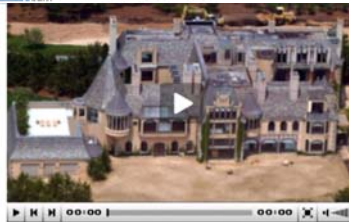
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