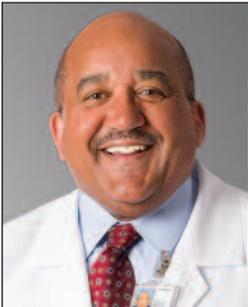


This special COVID-19 edition of Veterans' Health Watch provides tips for maintaining your physical and mental health from the comfort of your home.

A Message from the Director



I am happy to introduce our Moving Forward Plan to safely expand the availability of health care services in a phased approach, while maintaining a safe environment for all Veteran patients and employees. As we move forward, your safety and the safety of our employees will remain our top priority. On June 22, we launched Phase 1 of the Moving Forward Plan by offering the

following limited face-to-face services:

- ▶ **Baltimore VA Medical Center:** Dermatology, Imaging, Medical Specialty Care, Mental Health (Telehealth Focused), Pharmacy (Mail Only), Phlebotomy, Primary Care, Radiation Oncology, Surgical Care and Women's Health
- ▶ **Cambridge VA Outpatient Clinic:** Mental Health (Telehealth & Face-to-Face), Primary Care and Women's Health
- ▶ **Perry Point VA Medical Center:** Imaging, Mental Health (Telehealth Focused) and Pharmacy (Mail Only)

For your safety, we encourage you to continue to use our virtual care options (telehealth and video appointments) for specialty care, primary care and mental health services. When scheduling clinic appointments, patients will be informed if it will be a virtual or face-to-face visit.

Phase II of the Moving Forward Plan began on July 6 with the reopening of the remainder of our community based outpatient clinics, the Baltimore VA Annex and most other clinical areas for limited face-to-face service. Even during Phase II of the Moving Forward Plan, we encourage you to continue to use telephone and video appointments for your safety. For additional information about our Moving Forward Plan, please visit www.maryland.va.gov.

As a reminder, Veterans needing medical advice can contact the Telephone Care Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at **800-865-2441**, and a Veteran in crisis can speak with a specially trained responder 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling **800-273-8255, press 1**. Also, the Emergency Department at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and the Urgent Care Clinic at the Perry Point VA Medical Center are open and are safe options for receiving urgent health care at this time.

These are unprecedented times, but we will prevail. Please be safe and contact our Telephone Care Line if you need medical advice.

Sincerely,

Adam M. Robinson, Jr., M.D.

Director, VA Maryland Health Care System
VADM, MC, USN, (RET)
36th Surgeon General, USN

REMEMBER, we are here to serve you, just in modified ways.

If you are having a medical emergency, call 911 for immediate assistance! It is also safe to visit the Emergency Department at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and the Urgent Care Clinic at the Perry Point VA Medical Center for urgent health care needs. We have increased safety and cleaning protocols at both facilities to keep you safe.

Safeguards in Place to Protect You from the Spread of COVID-19 throughout the VA Maryland Health Care System



Listed below are the most recent updates about current safeguards in place throughout the health care system.

Screenings: Screening occurs using COVID-19-related questions at all VA Maryland Health Care System facilities. You can use your smartphone to answer the screening questions before visiting the VA by using Screen Pass:

- Before coming to a VA Maryland Health Care System facility, text the word “Screen” to 53079 or visit www.va.gov/covid19screen on your smartphone.
- Answer the simple screening questions.
- If you pass the screening, “OK to proceed” will be displayed on your phone screen.
- When you arrive for your appointment, just show your phone to the screener and you will be given access to the VA.
- If “More screening needed” is displayed, please call the Telephone Care Line at 800-865-2441 for guidance.

For individuals who don’t have a smartphone, are not familiar with Screen Pass, or forgot to answer the screening questions using Screen Pass before arriving at the VA, screeners are present to verbally ask the COVID-19-related screening questions.

Universal Masking Policy: Patients are required to wear a mask at all times when visiting a VA facility for a scheduled, onsite clinic appointment. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, patients who refuse to wear a mask will not be allowed to enter a VA facility or will be asked to leave if they do not wear a mask while waiting for an appointment or traveling throughout a

VA facility. Patients with a scheduled, onsite clinic appointment will be issued a mask when entering the VA facility if they do not have one when they arrive.

Restricted Access: Only patients with a scheduled, onsite clinic appointment will be granted access to VA facilities, except for the Emergency Care Department at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and the Urgent Care Clinic at the Perry Point VA Medical Center.

Centralized Check-in & Waiting Area: We have established a centralized check-in and waiting area for outpatient specialty clinic appointments at the Baltimore VA Medical Center in the Canteen dining area on the 2nd floor. Here are the details about the centralized check-in and waiting area:

- The hours of operation are Monday-Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- After checking in, all Veteran outpatients will be asked to wait in the new waiting area until their number is displayed on a large screen monitor.
- Outpatients will be able to report to the appropriate outpatient specialty care clinic after their number has been displayed.
- The furniture in the waiting area is spaced 6 feet apart to provide the appropriate social distancing that is required.

Check-in Kiosks No Longer Available: For your protection, the kiosks at all locations throughout the VA Maryland Health Care System are no longer available to check-in for clinic appointments. After

scheduling a face-to-face clinic appointment, you will receive guidance on how and where to check-in when you arrive.

Visitor Guidelines: To protect our Veteran patients and employees from the spread of COVID-19, visitors are not authorized to enter a VA facility except for the following:

- Two visitors for end-of-life care and decision making;
- One escort for patients being discharged from inpatient care;
- One escort for medically compromised outpatients with an onsite, scheduled appointment;
- One visitor who has been asked by the inpatient care team to be part of the treatment and discharge planning process.

All visitors will be screened for flu-like symptoms and will be required to wear a mask at all times while in a VA facility. To help slow the spread of COVID-19, visitors who do not pass the screening process will not be allowed to enter the facility.

For a full listing of all COVID-19-related updates and guidance from the VA Maryland Health Care System, please visit our COVID-19 Information for Patients and Visitors website at www.maryland.va.gov/MARYLAND/COVID19.asp. You can also receive COVID-19-updates by calling our VA Maryland Health Care System COVID-19 Information Line at 410-605-7384. (This is a recording only and does not accept voicemails.)

REMINDERS



Mail-Order Prescriptions:

To limit the exposure of COVID 19, Pharmacy is continuing with the very successful use of mailing new and renewal prescriptions, including express and overnight delivery. The Outpatient Pharmacies at the Baltimore and Perry Point VA Medical Centers will only honor emergent prescription needs for in person pick up. All other medications and supplies will be

mailed. Veterans have the following options to refill their prescriptions:

- Call the Prescription Refill Line at 410 605 7395. After hearing the greeting, enter your full nine digit Social Security number followed by the “#” sign. Next, press option “2” for Pharmacy Information, and then press option “1” to order prescription refills.
- Complete and sign the refill request slip you received with your prescription and use the mailing label that was included to send it in to one of our two pharmacies.
- Submit a refill request through My HealthVet at www.myhealth.va.gov.

- If you have no remaining refills, call the Prescription Refill Line at 410 605 7395. After hearing the greeting, enter your full nine digit Social Security number followed by the “#” sign. Next, press option “2” for Pharmacy Information, and then press option “8” to talk to a pharmacy representative.

Limited Face-to-Face Services:

Even as we implement our Moving Forward Plan, we will continue to limit face to face services for your protection and the protection of our employees. For your safety, we encourage you to continue to use telephone and video appointments.

Urgent Care Needs:

The Emergency Department at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and the Urgent Care Clinic at the Perry Point VA Medical Center are open and are safe options for receiving urgent health care during the pandemic. The Emergency Department at the Baltimore VA Medical Center is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The Urgent Care Clinic at the Perry Point VA Medical Center is open Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Perry Point Campus Closed:

(Open for Scheduled Appointments and Urgent Care)

The campus of the Perry Point VA Medical Center is closed to the public until further notice to protect against the spread of COVID 19. This closure applies to the entire campus, including non patient areas like the shoreline and walking trails. Only VA employees, outpatients with scheduled clinic appointments, residential care patients, residents of the HELP Veterans Village, and authorized deliveries will be granted access to *the campus*.



Remember, help is a phone call away:

- **Medical Emergencies -** If you are having a medical or mental health emergency, dial 911 immediately.
- **Telephone Care Line -** If you need medical advice, call the Telephone Care Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 800 865 2441.
- **Veterans Crisis Line -** If you are a Veteran in crisis, specially trained responders are ready to help you, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a

year by calling 800 273 8255 and press 1.

- **Flu-Like Symptom -** If you are experiencing flu like symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath, call the Telephone Care Line at 800 865 2441, and press 1.
- **Prescription Refills -** To request a prescription refill or to check on the status of a prescription, call the Prescription Refill Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 410 605 7395.

If you have no remaining refills, call the Prescription Refill Line Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. After hearing the greeting, enter your full nine digit Social Security number followed by the “#” sign. Next, press option “2” for Pharmacy Information, and then press option “8” to talk to a pharmacy representative.

- **Primary Care -** If you would like to speak with a primary care team member, please call the

Primary Care Call Center Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 410 605 7777.

- **Appointment Center -** To schedule, change or cancel a clinic appointment, call the Appointment Center Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 410 605 7333.

VA Virtual Care Tools

Allow Veterans to Access VA Health Care from the Comfort—and Safety—of their Homes.



The VA Maryland Health Care System has taken extensive measures to keep our Veteran patients, employees, volunteers and community members safe.

Throughout this time, the health care system has continued to deliver high-quality care to Veterans through VA's virtual care options. When scheduling clinic appointments, patients will be instructed if it will be a virtual or face-to-face visit. Thanks to today's technology, our Veteran patients can stay connected and stay safe by using virtual care. Veterans can send

secure messages to their health care team, access their medical records, refill prescriptions, and even have a medical appointment through telephone or video, all while following the social distancing guidelines.

Many Veteran patients have already discovered and are enjoying the convenience of virtual care. For those new to the technology, we recommend getting started by watching the Virtual Care video from the Veterans Health Administration, which is available at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3dZ12GW>.

Here is some additional guidance to help you become accustomed to health care technology:

VA Telehealth Services

When learning about options for virtual health care, you may also hear the term telehealth. VA virtual care falls under the umbrella of VA Telehealth services, which facilitates care from a Veteran's home and connects Veterans to specialized care in clinics and hospitals. You can learn more by visiting VA's Telehealth Services websites at the following link: <https://telehealth.va.gov>.

MyHealtheVet

My HealtheVet is VA's online personal health record designed to help Veterans partner with their VA care team. To access the array of services available through My HealtheVet, you will need to create a basic account and then upgrade your account to premium. Go to www.myhealth.va.gov to get started. Once on the MyHealtheVet homepage, click "Register," fill in the form and submit.

To upgrade your MyHealtheVet account,

which will enable you to request prescription refills, send secure messages to your health care team, and view lab results through the system, you will need to complete additional steps to verify and protect your identity. This can now be done without having to visit a VA facility in person. Follow the instructions found on the My HealtheVet website. For step-by-step instructions, download a remote proofing guide by visiting the following website: www.maryland.va.gov/RemoteProofing.pdf.

COVID-19 CHAMPIONS



Experts have learned that an effective response to COVID-19 is determined by what we know about how it is transmitted, the symptoms of infection, and how to protect ourselves and our loved ones from its impact. Armed with this knowledge, the VA Maryland Health Care System identified COVID-19 Champions who help guide fellow employees in solid prevention practices and provide reassurance amid challenging and ever-changing clinical circumstances. They help to remind all employees of the role they play in protecting patients and themselves as they work together to provide safe, quality and compassionate care to our Veteran patients.

The following are a few brief profiles of some of our COVID-19 Champions who are working on the frontlines throughout the VA Maryland Health Care System. You can visit the VA Maryland Health Care System Facebook page for more profiles and updates from the frontlines, which is available at the following link: www.facebook.com/MDVAHCS/.



CHRISTOPHER AQUINO, Hospice and Palliative Care Nurse at the Perry Point VA Medical Center

Christopher became a VA Maryland Health Care System COVID-19 Champion to proactively protect employees and Veterans.

"I am one of the frontliners and wanted to continuously serve by doing the proper screening, preventing the spread, isolating, and reporting the positive symptoms for appropriate care and treatment."



RHONDA THORPE, Same Day Surgery Nurse at the Baltimore VA Medical Center

Rhonda gained first-hand experience of the vital role that nurses play as health care professionals in her early 20s when her father, a Navy Veteran, was diagnosed with a terminal

illness. The nurses—so caring and supportive to her father, family and herself—convinced her to make a career change and become a nurse.

"I believe it's every American's civic duty to help in any way possible to support the fight against COVID-19. It's important to staff the COVID-19 Information Hotline to address Veteran and staff concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. I personally want to give back by supporting our Veterans who have sacrificed so much for our country."



ERIK VON ROSENVINGE, Chief of Gastroenterology for the VA Maryland Health Care System

What prompted Dr. von Rosenvinge to step up as a VA Maryland Health Care System COVID-19 Champion is his belief that his fellow Veterans deserve the best as do his

fellow colleagues.

"While I don't claim to be the best, I am willing to work hard on behalf of both groups. Hopefully, I can achieve at least part of what they deserve. Veterans deserve honesty. It is a scary time. Some of us won't survive this pandemic. But, rest assured, the VA will work tirelessly to help our Veterans, and our nation will prevail!"



DR. MARK COWAN, Pulmonologist and Physician in the Intensive Care Unit at the Baltimore VA Medical Center

Dr. Cowan stepped up as a COVID-19 Champion because lungs are his bailiwick. He wants Veterans to know that his work is just a small

part of the overall VA mission.

"I've found that the health care providers at the VA, without exception, are qualified, motivated, hard-working and willing to do anything they can to help Veterans."

Sleeping More Soundly in Uncertain Times



Many Americans are adjusting to a new norm. Whether by self-isolation or medically advised quarantine due to COVID-19, chances are we are spending more time at home and less time participating in activities that keep us engaged and active. Obviously, these changes impact our eating habits, work schedules and time with family, but they can also impact sleep. “Your ‘internal clock,’ or circadian rhythm, determines the timing of sleep, your appetite and other bodily functions,” said Erin Etzel, Ph.D., Staff Psychologist with the VA Maryland Health Care System. “Your internal clock is very sensitive to changes in your daily routine, activity level and time outside in the sunshine. All of these have probably changed recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” she added.

Fortunately, there are some ways that you can keep your internal clock regular and strong for better sleep:

- ☛ **Wake** up at a consistent time every day, even if your daily activities have changed.
- ☛ **Don't** eat big meals or drink caffeine or alcohol for at least a few hours before trying to sleep.
- ☛ **Aim** for 30 minutes of daily physical activity (outside if you can), but not too close to bedtime.

- ☛ **Try** getting outside at least once a day for 20 minutes. Remember to practice social distancing and wear a mask in public places.
- ☛ **Don't** look at smartphone or computer screens close to bedtime. The blue light from electronics can be confusing for your internal clock, especially if you are not getting much time in natural sunlight.
- ☛ **Avoid** napping during the day, although your daily routine has probably changed.
- ☛ **Don't** go to bed unless your eyes are feeling heavy or you start dozing off.
 - If you are not sleepy at bedtime (or are too worried to sleep), then try doing something else somewhere other than your bed, until you are sleepy.
 - Some ideas include reading a book, listening to soft music or browsing through a magazine.
- ☛ Your bedroom should be where you go to sleep, not where you go if you are bored, angry, stressed, sad or feel like you need to get away from your spouse, children or roommates.
 - **Use** your bed only for SLEEP.
 - **Find** a different spot to read, write, eat, watch TV, talk on the phone, surf the Internet, etc.



NO EXCUSE ZONE

No gym? No problem. **No weights?** No problem. **No time?** No problem.

The VA Maryland Health Care System's GeroFit Program offers a beginner's workout that Veterans can do at home, no gym equipment needed! All that is needed is a sturdy chair with no wheels and something to hold onto for resistance (could be a large book, a milk jug or water bottles). Before starting any exercise routine, check with your doctor to be sure exercise is safe for you and always exercise with someone else in the house in case you need help.

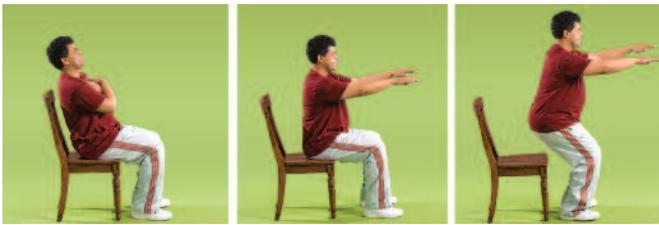
It's recommended that you do at least one of the workouts we are presenting at least three times per week to get the most benefit. "We all know exercise is important in our daily lives, but

it can be hard when you're stuck at home. It's so important to stay active during this time because not only can exercise strengthen muscles, but it can also improve heart health, boost immune function and improve mental health," said Megan Kelly, MS, Exercise Physiologist for the Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Care program at the Baltimore VA Medical Center.

Veterans can also find exercise videos online, including a chair yoga class by visiting the VA GeroFit website at the following link:

https://www.va.gov/GERIATRICS/pages/gerofit_Home.asp.
Click "GeroFit Resources" and scroll down to "Exercise Videos."

Exercise physiologist at the VA Maryland Health Care System offer this comprehensive total body at-home workout. Each exercise can be done 10-20 times each, depending on starting fitness level. All can be done seated or standing. None require equipment.



Sit to stand:

Start in a sitting position. When ready, transfer balance and bring yourself into a full standing position. Try to use hands as little as possible, except for when needed for balance. Return to a seated position, remembering to maintain a slow, controlled descent into the chair (do not plop). To increase difficulty, use differing arm positions, change the base (i.e. staggered, wide base, narrow base), or close your eyes.



Small backwards leg raises:

Use support if needed. If not using support, place your hands on your hips to maintain balance. Slightly tighten your abdominal muscles. Try to keep your chest up and head looking forward throughout the movement, and do not tilt your body forward. Tighten your gluteus maximus (glutes) to lift your right leg backward, trying to raise your heel towards the ceiling about half of your range of motion. Keep the leg that you are lifting fairly straight. Your supporting leg should be straight, but not fully locked out. Hold the leg in the air for a three count. Slowly lower your leg back to the starting position. Do the same for the left side.



Calf raises:

Stand with your back to a corner and a chair in front of you for intermittent support, if necessary. Place your feet shoulder width apart. Rise up on your toes and hold for three seconds. Lower back down.



Large arm circles (sitting):

Start by sitting in a chair with your weight centered. Lift both your arms out to the side so they are parallel with the floor. Perform large arm circles backwards. Repeat doing the same, but doing large forward arm circles.



Standing sidekicks:

Stand with your back to a corner and chair in front of you for intermittent support if necessary. Lift the right leg out to the side and then return it to starting position while keeping your torso straight. Repeat with the left leg. If unable to perform the exercise as described, lightly touch your toe on the ground for support at either end of the movement.



Trunk rotation (sitting):

Hands start resting on your thighs. Initiate the movement by tightening your abdominal muscles. Clasp your hands together by interlacing fingers and raise your arms straight out in front of you. Twist your trunk to the right as far as you can by rotating your torso and initiating the movement with your waist and abdominal muscles, while keeping your hips stationary (your arms will follow to the right as you twist). Your weight should remain evenly distributed in your chair. Keep your chest upright. Hold for three a count. Return to the center and keep your hands clasped and arms raised. Perform this same movement twisting to the left.

VA's PREVENTS Website Helps Veterans Focus on their Wellbeing and Caring for those they Love.

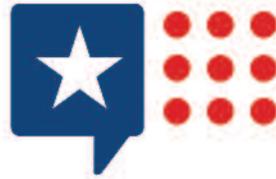
The President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) is focused on a holistic, all-hands-on-deck approach to suicide prevention. The goal of PREVENTS is to prevent suicide — among not just Veterans, but all Americans. By adopting a holistic public health approach, PREVENTS is acting on the knowledge that suicide prevention is everyone's business, and that by working together, locally and nationally, we can prevent suicide.

Learn more by visiting the PREVENTS website at <https://www.va.gov/PREVENTS/resources.asp>.

Tips for Mental Wellness During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

- 1 Be sure to keep your mental health appointments (now being offered via the telephone or VA Video Connect with a VA provider).
- 2 Review your safety plan when you start to feel overwhelmed. For a safety plan template, visit <https://starttheconversation.veteranscrisisline.net/pdf/what-is-a-safety-plan/>.
- 3 Join AA/NA meetings and other support groups online.
- 4 Add apps to your smartphone that provide techniques, such as mindfulness and deep breathing. See the National Center for PTSD COVID Coach app on page #10.
- 5 Video chat with friends and family when you feel lonely.
- 6 Create a small social network group and meet via online meeting apps.
- 7 Call the Veterans Crisis Line at **800-273-8255**, **press #1** to speak with a provider for support.

Veterans Crisis Line



1-800-273-8255
PRESS 1

Learn and share the warning signs for suicide and how to help yourself, a friend or even someone else.
#BeThere To be there for someone, even if you cannot be there in person.

SUICIDE WARNINGS:

#BeThere – Now More than Ever Before

These signs may mean someone is at risk for suicide. Risk becomes greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss or change.

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself.
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun.
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Talking about being a burden to others.
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated.
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- Displaying extreme mood swings.

Suicide is preventable. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 800 273 TALK (8255). With help comes hope.



At Home Safety Checks

Spending more time at home presents the perfect opportunity to tackle a long list of home maintenance tasks. That list should also include safety checks, particularly firearm safety. Knowing how to properly care for and store your firearm and ammunition can reduce the risk of unintentional firearm deaths.

Safe firearm storage matters because no one can unfire a firearm.

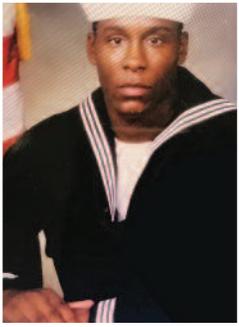
Take these simple steps to keep your family safe:

- Make sure children and unauthorized adults cannot access firearms by keeping them locked and unloaded when not in use.
- Store ammunition separately from firearms and out of reach of children and unauthorized adults.
- Regularly reassess steps to ensure safe storage and use of firearms, especially during periods of increased stress or emotional crisis.

Request a free gunlock from your local VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator by calling 410-642-2411, extension 25020.

Miracles Happen

Getting Connected to Mental Health in the VA Maryland Health Care System



Just ask **Navy Veteran Jamal Thomas**, 39, who came to the Emergency Department at the Baltimore VA Medical Center with flu-like symptoms. He never expected to be diagnosed with COVID-19, but within a short time of his arrival, he was admitted and became extremely sick. After more than a month in Intensive Care, Thomas beat the odds and he beat COVID-19, getting well enough to head home.

“I feel great. I don’t remember much of the last month, but my nurses told me it was touch and go for a while,”

Thomas said, noting that when he finally woke up, he didn’t know where he was or how he got there.

Clinicians at the Baltimore VA Medical Center took swift action to care for Thomas, whose body was quickly shutting down due to the coronavirus. “Our focus on learning all we could about this virus and on providing safe, quality and compassionate care played an important role in the early steps taken to care for Mr. Thomas,” said Dr. Adam M. Robinson, Jr., director of the VA Maryland Health Care System.

During his month as an inpatient, teams of clinicians worked together to save his life. “It took a lot of specialists,” said Dr. Stephen Musisi, chief hospitalist. “The coronavirus attacks all body systems at the same time. Specialists from every clinical center—the infection control team, the nephrologists, and the cardiac team—every specialty played a role in providing care,” he said.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Thomas, his family and friends added him to prayer circles and chains. He later learned that his former shipmates, with whom he kept in contact since his 2006 discharge, spread the word to others who served with him, and they had formed a prayer circle on his behalf. “There were a lot of people praying for me during that time,” he said.

Led by Nurse Manager Meshondra Collins, a small army of nurses provided around-the-clock care for Thomas as he made a slow and long recovery to being well enough to go home. “This is the result of dedicated nursing and teamwork,” she said. Collins, also a Navy Veteran and currently a Reservist, added, “I’m just so proud of the care we provided that got Mr. Thomas to the point where he was well enough to go home.”

Thomas praised the nurses who provided his care. “All my nurses were great. Every day, they lifted me up with a positive attitude. When they came into my room, they came in with a smile.”

For Thomas, the biggest miracle of all was yet to come. He faced one more hurdle—a two-week quarantine at home—before he was able to finally hug his children. “I will never take life for granted again,” he said as he left the hospital.

Veteran patients new to mental health services at the VA Maryland Health Care System can access mental health services through the Mental Health Triage Clinic and Veterans can contact their VA primary care team by phone or Secure Messaging through My HealtheVet at www.myhealth.va.gov.

The Mental Health Triage Clinic continues to see patients with scheduled appointments virtually via phone or video. Veterans can call **410-605-7417** to schedule a virtual appointment. Due to COVID-19 precautions that limit the number of people entering VA facilities throughout the health care system, appointments are strongly encouraged.

Veterans who are active mental health patients within the VA Maryland Health Care System, or if the Mental Health Triage Clinic recommends trauma treatment, can be referred to the Trauma Recovery Program. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are also offering phone or video assessment and therapy appointments in this program. Veterans do not need to leave the comfort of their home to attend appointments. The Trauma Recovery Program focusses on providing short-term treatments based on evidence, with the goal of helping Veterans return to valued activities. For more information about the VA Maryland Health Care System’s Trauma Recovery Program, call the Trauma Recovery Program Coordinator at **410-637-1230**.



“I just want to grab hold of my kids and tell them I love them.”



Stock Up on the Good Stuff!

Do you know which foods to stock up on to ensure that you can meet your caloric and nutrient needs even during a pandemic when making trips to a grocery store or even accessing food might be challenging? Let's start with the basics. "Aim to stock up on adequate proteins, carbohydrates and healthy fats such as nuts/seeds and olive oil," says Kevin Grodnitzky, MS, RDN, CDE, LDN, the MOVE! Weight Loss Coordinator and Registered Dietitian Nutritionist for the VA Maryland Health Care System.

Back to Basics



Proteins: Proteins are found in animal products like meat, poultry, fish and seafood, eggs, milk and milk products. But did you know that protein comes in plant form, too? Nuts, seeds and beans, including lentils and black-eyed peas, are all good sources of protein. Protein in smaller quantities can even be found in grains and vegetables.



Plant protein beans: If you like one or more types of beans (red, great northern, black beans, black eyed peas, lentils, etc.), dry beans or canned beans are great and healthy protein options to stock up on! Beans are great alone or in soups, chili, salads, stews, with rice and other whole

grains, in a tortilla, in burgers (like black bean burgers), and a variety of other ways. An excellent source of protein (for muscle and other body structures), beans also provide fiber (for a healthy gastrointestinal tract) and carbohydrates (for energy). Dry beans have no water and thus are safe to store for months or longer, and canned beans have a long shelf life. Bottom line, if you have dry or canned beans in storage, you have a powerhouse of nutrients to keep you healthy and nourished throughout the year.

There you go! Stock up on dry or canned (low sodium or better yet, no salt added) beans to stay healthy!

Friendly tip: If you are not used to eating beans, start slow and build gradually. Beans may cause gas formation, so giving your body time to get used to digesting beans will minimize gas and maximize tolerability. Try to start with about ¼ cup cooked per day and slowly increase the amount. Soaking beans overnight before cooking them can also help to reduce the likelihood of gas.



Want to ensure that your immune system has the nutrients it needs to perform adequately?



White blood cells, the cells that protect your body from infectious disease and foreign invaders, are packed with a variety of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants (prevents cell damage), and other nutrients. One such nutrient is vitamin C. Including vitamin C rich foods in your diet helps white blood cells function optimally. In addition, the body uses vitamin C for collagen synthesis, neurotransmitter synthesis, and as an antioxidant, among other functions.

Our bodies do not make vitamin C, so we need to consume vitamin C rich foods in our diets. A few foods rich in vitamin C to include on your shopping list are:

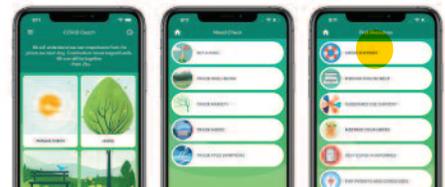
1. All citrus, including oranges and lemons
2. Green, red and yellow peppers
3. Broccoli
4. Kiwi
5. Brussels sprouts
6. Strawberries
7. Kale
8. Tomatoes
9. Papayas

Aim for vitamin C rich foods daily to maximize your immune health!

Friendly tip: For dental health, rinse your mouth with water after eating citrus so the acids don't wear away tooth enamel.

Is COVID-19 Stressing You Out? VA has an app for that!

The COVID-19 pandemic is raising anxiety levels worldwide. VA's new COVID Coach mobile application can help you get through this time of uncertainty by teaching you how to practice self-care, find ways to stay socially connected while being physically distant, find meaning during this stressful time, and cope with the many challenges you may now be facing.



To download the app, visit the VA Mobile Apps website at https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/COVID_coach_app.asp.



COPING WITH LOSS

Any type of loss can trigger feelings of grief. You may be grieving the loss of a family member or friend, job, sense of financial security or sense of normalcy. Fun activities or trips that you were looking forward to may have been canceled. You may be grieving your pre-COVID-19 life and routine. Grief may surface when you watch the news or feel the emotional toll of being quarantined. Many people may also be experiencing anticipatory grief, or the feeling that arises as you wait for a loss to occur, as if loss or death is just around the corner. “Feelings of grief may be amplified by being more isolated and unable to engage directly with our social supports or normal soothing activities,” says Shruti N. Shah, PhD, clinical psychologist in Hospice & Palliative Care for the VA Maryland Health Care

System. Dr. Shah offers the following tips on coping with loss or grief during these unfamiliar times:

- ▶ Acknowledge that these feelings are normal and valid, and possibly stronger because of the special circumstances we are all facing.
- ▶ Keep in mind that grief is a highly personal experience. The way you are grieving now may be different from how you’ve grieved in the past.
- ▶ Allow yourself to take as much time to grieve as you need. You are on your own timeline.
- ▶ Be sure to keep taking care of yourself and your medical needs. Self-care becomes even more important while grieving.
- ▶ Reach out to your family, friends, neighbors, community members, church family, etc., for support and opportunity to express your grief, reminisce and explore how you can honor a loved one in creative and meaningful ways. Maintaining emotional connections with others, even virtually, is so important. The people you are reaching out to may be also grieving themselves and could benefit from a check-in.
- ▶ Seek professional support if your grief starts to feel unmanageable. VA staff are here to help you process your grief and connect you with resources for more support. You can always call the Veteran’s Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255, press 1** 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for assistance.

Community Members Make Masks for Heroes





Carolyn Boozer began sewing at the age of 5. She got her first sewing machine when she was 12 and she’s been an avid sewer for 50-some years now. When her daughter, **Lisa Boozer-Elliott**, told her the VA Maryland Health Care System was seeking handmade masks to use during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of their Handmade Masks for Heroes Project, Boozer says she was happy to volunteer her services. She decided she would make masks and donate them in honor of Lisa, a nurse at the Loch Raven VA Medical Center.

She also saw the Handmade Masks for Heroes Project as a teaching opportunity. Just before the coronavirus hit, Boozer had been planning to give Lisa, along with Lisa’s 16-year-old daughter and mother-in-law, sewing lessons. With in-person gatherings on hold because of the pandemic, the group

is looking to conduct lessons online. While they work on coordinating the online lessons, Carolyn made the first batch of 50 two-sided, reversible masks in two sizes herself.

When Lisa sees her Veteran patients wearing her mom’s masks, it makes her proud. “My mom has been very selfless and had donated handmade masks several times for us at Loch Raven,” she said.

“I feel blessed that I was able to make masks and donate them in honor of my daughter,” said Boozer. “I pray that the recipients enjoy the masks and that they help keep them safe from the pandemic.”

Since launching the Handmade Masks for Heroes Project, the VA Maryland Health Care System has received more than 11,000 cloth masks donated by individuals and community groups. The handmade masks

are being distributed throughout the health care system for use by patients and non-clinical staff members. This helps to conserve the medical-grade masks for clinicians on the frontlines.

“The response to our appeal for masks has been great,” said Susan Kern, program manager for Voluntary Service. “Every little bit counts. It’s all very much appreciated, and it’s a great way to show that you care for our Veteran heroes and the VA employees who are taking care of them.”

To learn more about the Handmade Mask for Heroes Project for the VA Maryland Health Care System, or to schedule a date and time to deliver handmade masks, call our Voluntary Service Office at **410-642-1136** or email vamhcsvoluntaryservice@va.gov.

VA



HealthWatch

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
VA Maryland Health Care System

Public & Community Relations (135)
10 N. Greene Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Published for the Veteran patients of the VA Maryland Health Care System. This newsletter is offered to provide reliable health information. It is not intended to take the place of medical advice, which should be obtained directly from your health care provider. If you have questions or comments about *HealthWatch*, please call 410-605-7098.



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Important Phone Numbers

Please report a change of address to the Veterans Health Administration Call Center at 877-222-8387 and press 1.

Appointment Center
410-605-7333

Automated Appointment Line
410-605-7395 (Press Option 1)

Beneficiary Travel
Baltimore VA Medical Center:
410-605-7318

Perry Point VA Medical Center:
410-642-2411, ext. 26895

Billing Information
866-393-0006

Burial Information & Benefits
Baltimore National Cemetery
410-644-9696

State Veterans Cemeteries
410-923-6981

Care in the Community
410-642-2411, ext. 26924

Caregiver Support Program
410-605-7000, ext. 54143

Eligibility & Enrollment
877-222-8387

Long-Term Care Information Line
410-642-1121

Medical Records/Release of Information
Baltimore VA Medical Center
410-605-7348

Perry Point VA Medical Center
410-642-2411, ext. 26028

My HealthVet Coordinator
410-605-7045

Patient Concerns & Compliments
Baltimore VA Medical Center,
Baltimore VA Annex and
Glen Burnie VA Outpatient Clinic
410-605-7099

Perry Point VA Medical Center
and Cambridge & Pocomoke City
VA Outpatient Clinics
410-642-2411, ext. 25097

Loch Raven VA Medical Center
and Fort Meade VA Outpatient Clinic
410-605-7542

Prescription Refill Line
410-605-7395 (Press Option 2)

Returning Veterans
(Transition and Care Management)
410-605-7259

Telephone Care Line 800-865-2441

VA Benefits
Veterans Benefits Information Line
800-827-1000
Maryland VA Service & Benefits
Program 800-446-4926, ext. 6450

VA Maryland Health Care System Facilities

Baltimore VA Medical Center
410-605-7000

Loch Raven VA Medical Center
410-605-7000

Perry Point VA Medical Center
410-642-2411

Cambridge VA Outpatient Clinic
410-228-6243

Eastern Baltimore County
VA Outpatient Clinic
443-730-2020

Fort Meade VA Outpatient Clinic
410-305-5300

Glen Burnie VA Outpatient Clinic
410-590-4140

Pocomoke City VA Outpatient Clinic
410-957-6718

Vet Centers

Annapolis Vet Center 410-605-7826

Baltimore Vet Center 410-764-9400

Dundalk Vet Center 410-282-6144

Elkton Vet Center 410-392-4485

Veterans Crisis Line
800-273-8255, Press 1

Women Veterans Services
410-605-7275

CLIP AND SAVE