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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
VA Sunshine Healthcare Network (VISN 8)

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VETERANS Health MATTERS

*Award Winning Wellness Magazine for **VISN 8** Veterans
in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico & the U.S. Virgin Islands*

INSIDE:

Safe & Responsible
Use of Opioids for Pain



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Veterans Health Matters is a quarterly health and wellness magazine for Veterans produced by the VISN 8 Office of Communication. VISN 8 is the country's largest network of VA hospitals and clinics serving Veterans in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Your feedback is welcome. If you'd like to comment on the content, please e-mail or write to:

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To Our Readers



VA is committed to finding better ways for Veterans to manage pain and limit risks of long-term opioid therapy. Learn on pages 4 to 5 about the health risks of using opioids, especially for long periods of time. Remember, your health care team is there to help you find the best pain management plan.

Have you already met with a Whole Health Coach to help meet your health and wellness goals? If not, find out on page 3 how you can benefit by connecting with a Whole Health Coach.

We are excited that our VISN 8 Clinical Contact Center is up and running, making urgent health care services more convenient and accessible for enrolled Veterans. Check out page 6 for details.

If you haven't received your flu shot yet to fight this year's flu, there's still time, as explained on page 7. Finally, to support your healthy eating goals, look for the recipe on the same page to make a lighter version of a popular take-out meal.

Be well!

Miguel H. LaPuz, M.D.
Network Director, VISN 8

Managing Lower Back Pain

Chronic lower back pain can affect many parts of your life - how you move, sleep and feel, and how you communicate with others. There is no one size fits all for pain management. The key is to work with your VA health care team to find the best pain management plan with the right combination of approaches that work for you. In addition to medication, here are more approaches to consider:



- Healthy choices that affect pain, mood, and daily activities, such as regular exercise, limiting alcohol, and quitting tobacco.
- Sleep enhancement programs to improve sleep quality.
- Acupuncture to stimulate healing.
- Physical therapy to strengthen and improve body mechanics.
- Chiropractic care to align the spine and mobilize joints.
- Meditation and relaxation exercises to relax the body and reduce stress.
- Pain management groups to get support from those also experiencing pain.
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to learn coping skills.

What's a Whole Health Coach?

Changing the conversation using Whole Health

Great progress is being made with the implementation of Whole Health in VA health care facilities in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Whole Health is VA's model of holistic health care that looks at many areas which affect Veterans' lives. This approach includes relationships, diet, sleep patterns, work environment, and more.

Traditionally, health care providers focused on acute medical issues that patients faced, zeroing in on diseases and ailments. In VISN 8 and across the country, our focus has shifted. Instead of asking "what's wrong with you," we are starting a conversation about what matters most to you. Our goal is to get to know you first, putting you – rather than the medical issue – at the center of your health and health care.

While the Whole Health model is a national initiative across the Veterans Health Administration, we have taken a proactive and innovative approach to implementing this new model in our facilities. We are hiring and training more than 170 Whole Health Coaches. They will work in Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs) and other teams across VISN 8. Their job is to support Veterans in developing new and healthier habits and practices, with the overall goal of helping Veterans realize their full health potential.



Talk with your PACT today to see how you can benefit from Whole Health for Life and from connecting with a Whole Health Coach.

A Whole Health Coach:

- Assists you in developing a personalized health plan that is based on what matters most to you as a Veteran. The plan is based on your own goals, values, preferences, and lifestyle.
- Partners with you to take action toward behavior change that is present and future-oriented.
- Recognizes that your health is much broader than an acute medical issue. The emphasis is on health enhancements/strengths rather than disorders/weaknesses.
- Supports you in achieving your optimal health that considers your entire mental, physical, social, and spiritual well-being.

Safe & Responsible Use of Opioids for Pain

Opioids are medicines sometimes used to treat pain. Opioids are also called “opiates” or “narcotics.” They can be dangerous, even when prescribed and taken as directed. Plus, any dose can be harmful. That’s why we want to make sure you have the information and strategies to keep you and others safe when using these medicines.

Prescription Opioid Medicines

- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®, Lortab®, Norco®)
- Oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®, Endocet®)
- Morphine (MS Contin®, Kadian®, Oramorph SR®)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid®)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic®)
- Codeine (Tylenol® with Codeine #3, Tylenol® with Codeine #4)
- Methadone (Dolophine HCL®, Methadose™)
- Tramadol (Ultram®)
- Buprenorphine (Butrans®)
- Oxymorphone (Opana®)
- Tapentadol (Nucynta®)

Opioids can also come from sources other than medicines you get from your health care providers. These include medicines not prescribed to you (e.g., from family and friends) and “street drugs.” Any medicine that you do not get from a pharmacy with a prescription can have extra risks. The ingredients and strength may be unknown. For example, counterfeit pills may contain fentanyl or carfentanyl, also known as “elephant tranquilizers.” It is important to tell your provider(s) about all medicines and substances you take because some can interact to cause harm, including overdose and death.

Tolerance

When you take an opioid daily, your body gets used to the medication. Over time, the opioid becomes less effective at reducing your pain. Needing higher and higher doses to get the desired effect is a sign of possible risk for addiction and overdose.

Dependence

Dependence means that your body will rely on the opioid to feel normal. If you stop the opioid suddenly or decrease the dose too quickly, you will feel increased pain and other symptoms of withdrawal. Dependence can also happen when you take low doses for acute pain for less than a week, such as for dental procedures or fractures. To reduce the risk of dependence when treating acute pain, opioids should only be used for five days or less.

Did you know?

Opioids are not the most effective way to treat long-term, non-cancer pain.

In fact, opioids are no longer recommended for treating most patients with chronic pain.

Risks

The most serious risks include stopping breathing (overdose) resulting in death, and the risk of developing opioid use disorder (addiction). Increasing the dose of an opioid will increase the risk of serious health issues. If you have health conditions such as sleep apnea, breathing problems, liver problems, or kidney problems, you may have a higher risk for overdose and side effects. These problems can occur even with low doses of opioids. Drinking alcohol, using benzodiazepines, or taking other medicines that make you sleepy can also increase your risk of side effects and overdose.

Opioid Use Disorder

This is a chronic brain disease that develops from repeated use of opioids. A moderate to severe form is also known as addiction and can be life-threatening. The risk of death from overdose is 6 to 20 times greater for those with opioid use disorder than for the general population. Up to 40% of patients who take opioids for more than 90 days have an opioid use disorder.

For more information on chronic pain management and safe use of opioids visit **www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/index.asp**.

Reducing Your Risk When Taking Opioids

A good plan starts with a conversation. Your health care team will discuss with you the best ways to treat your pain. Together, you will discuss the risks, possible benefits, alternatives to using opioids, and how much pain relief you can expect from the different options. If prescription opioids are being considered, you will receive information on possible side effects, other risks, and monitoring procedures needed for your safety. The overall goal is to create a plan that increases the chances of successfully managing your pain.

If your pain management plan includes prescription opioids, you will be asked to sign an informed consent form once all your questions are answered. This shows that you understand and agree with your treatment that includes opioids and the possible risks when taking them for chronic pain.

24/7, Virtual Urgent Care for Veterans



1-877-741-3400

Last July, the VA Sunshine Healthcare Network (VISN 8) launched an exciting and innovative service for Veterans enrolled in VA health care in Florida, South Georgia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The new VISN 8 Clinical Contact Center allows Veterans to receive 24/7, virtual urgent care from the comfort of their homes, or wherever they may be.

Services available through the Clinical Contact Center include general administrative support, nurse advice and triage, and virtual visits with a doctor or nurse practitioner. These virtual visits take place over the telephone or by using VA Video Connect, which is a secure video application. This mobile app allows Veterans to have private video discussions with providers about medical and/or mental health care. Veterans can learn more about VA Video Connect at: <https://mobile.va.gov/app/va-video-connect>. The CCC also has clinical pharmacists who are available to assist with medication questions and prescriptions.



Veterans enrolled and eligible for VA health care can contact the center and talk to a provider at no cost. A co-pay may be required for prescription medications depending on a Veteran's eligibility group for VA health benefits.

The VISN 8 Clinical Contact Center is the first of its kind in VA. It's just one of the many ways we are improving health care delivery to America's heroes. For more information about the CCC, please visit www.visn8.va.gov/ccp.asp.



Watch the Video!

To see a video version of 24/7, Virtual Urgent Care for Veterans visit www.visn8.va.gov/VISN8/news/publications.asp.

Still Time for Flu Shot



If you haven't received your flu shot yet to fight this year's flu, it's not too late! Flu season usually lasts into March or April. It takes about two weeks to get full immunity protection once you get the shot. The flu shot is the best way to protect against the flu if the flu is still out there and spreading.

- **Veterans enrolled in VA health care:** You can get a free flu shot at your VA health care facility. Or, you can get a free shot at the nearest Walgreens until March 31, 2020, with no appointment necessary. Just show your Veterans Health Identification Card and another form of photo ID, and your VA immunization record will be updated automatically.
- **Veterans not enrolled in VA health care:** You may still qualify. Learn more at www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/vaccination.

Oven Baked Fries & Foil Packet Fish

Watch how to make this meal on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/uT4Av-EDMB4>

Ingredients

Fish (2 servings):

- 2/3 pounds cod or white fish
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 lemon + 1 teaspoon zest
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley or 1/2 teaspoon dried
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- Tinfoil - 24 inches

Fries (3 servings):

- 2 medium yellow potatoes
- 1 medium sweet potato
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/4 teaspoon each salt and pepper



Directions

1. Lay tinfoil on a baking sheet. Place fish in the center of the tinfoil. Drizzle with olive oil and top with salt, lemon zest, and parsley.
2. Bake at 400 degrees F for 12-15 minutes, depending on fish thickness. Squeeze lemon juice over the fish before serving.
3. Wash and cut potatoes into "sticks" (see image). Place in a bowl. Add and mix with oil, garlic powder, salt, and pepper.
4. Spread potatoes on a baking sheet. Bake at 425 degrees F for 20-25 minutes, stirring half way through.

Nutritional information: Per serving fish and fries: 388 calories, 13 g total fat, 2 g saturated fat, 35 g carbohydrates, 4 g dietary fiber, 34 g protein, and 609 mg sodium.

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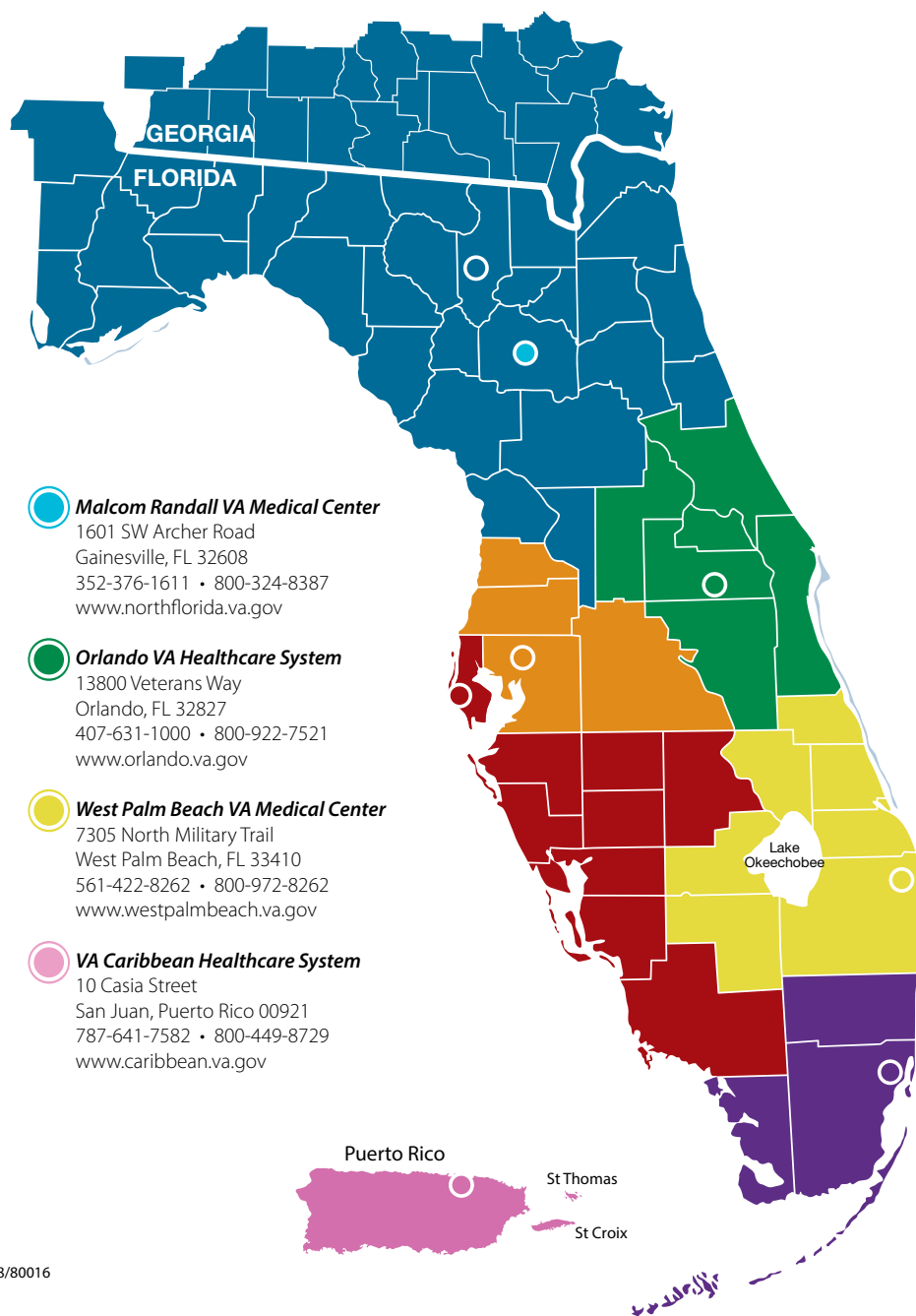
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www.va.gov/health/FindCare.asp



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