



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

**Office of Patient Care Services –
Office of Mental Health Services**

Fact Sheet

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VA Services for Patients with Substance Use Disorders (SUD)

Individuals with substance use disorders (SUD) range from those who use alcohol or drugs in ways that increase their risks for health problems to those whose chronic and severe misuse of alcohol or drugs has caused or exacerbated adverse life consequences. Often times, substance use disorders can lead to physical and mental health disabilities, employment insecurity or joblessness, legal difficulties and homelessness. Common symptoms of substance use disorders include physical and psychological withdrawal when not using the substance, needs for increasing use of alcohol or drugs to achieve the same level of effects as previously reached from lower use, difficulty in avoiding or limiting substance use, and diminished personal investment in important life activities involving career, family, social relationships,

In Fiscal Year 2009, 7 percent of Veterans receiving outpatient treatment at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers and clinics were diagnosed with a substance use disorder.

Every VA medical center operates a SUD specialty care program for the treatment of drug and alcohol problems. In Fiscal Year 2009, SUD specialty care programs treated nearly 152,000 Veterans, of whom 128,000 had diagnoses of substance use disorder including 28.2 percent who received diagnoses of alcohol problems only; 19.3 percent who had diagnoses for drug problems only and 52.4 percent who had both alcohol and drug problems. SUD programs offer a continuum of services, including standard outpatient treatment, intensive outpatient treatment, residential rehabilitation treatment programs, and inpatient programs. VA employs psychosocial and pharmacologic interventions that are evidence-based and include motivational enhancement therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy for relapse prevention, contingency management, 12-step facilitation counseling, SUD-focused behavioral couples counseling, as well as pharmacotherapies such as buprenorphine, methadone, naltrexone and acamprosate.

Beyond interventions provided by specialty SUD care programs, services for substance use disorders are also available in primary care settings and mental health clinics. Annual screening and the employment of brief interventions as needed for those experiencing alcohol problems are offered in primary care clinics and mental health clinics. Individuals with problems requiring more intensive interventions are referred to SUD specialty care.

Due to high rates of substance use disorders and psychiatric co-morbidity in Veterans, treatment for mental health concerns is either integrated or closely coordinated between SUD specialists and providers in other mental health services. For example, each VA PTSD team, moderate or large sized community based outpatient clinic (CBOC), and large mental health residential rehabilitation treatment program (MH RRTP) has a SUD specialist assigned to it.

VA Specialty Services for Substance Use Disorders (SUD)

Type of Program	Purpose of Program
Inpatient Units	Provide acute, in-hospital care for Veterans experiencing urgent medical or psychiatric symptoms
Residential Units	Provide intensive psychosocial treatment for those who can benefit from structured community environment. Have longer lengths of stay and lower staffing levels than inpatient care.
Intensive Outpatient Programs	Provide at least three hours of treatment services on at least three days per week. Category includes day treatment, partial hospitalization, and intensive outpatient clinic-based programs.
Standard Outpatient Units	Ambulatory services offered as either independent programs or in conjunction with other programs.
Combined PTSD/SUD services	Specialists in co-occurring PTSD and SUD

For more information, Veterans currently enrolled in VA health care can speak with their VA mental health or health care provider. Other Veterans and interested parties can find a complete list of VA health care facilities at: <http://www.va.gov/> or they can call VA's general information hotline at 1-800-827-1000. For more information about this fact sheet contact Dr. John P. Allen, Associate Chief Consultant, Addictive Disorders, VA Office of Mental Health at 202-461-7310.