

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
VA Healthcare-VISN 4

VISION

for Excellence

Newsletter for Veterans and Stakeholders in VISN 4

Issue 35



A life of service to women Veterans

When her landlord abruptly ended her lease, Air Force Veteran and dedicated volunteer Patricia "Pat" James-Booker was left without a home.

Luckily, help was nearby. Through her volunteer work at Wilmington VA Medical Center, Pat learned about the many programs available to Veterans at risk of homelessness.

She was able to quickly connect with VA homelessness services to find an apartment. Read more inside how Pat's experience inspired her to double down on her volunteer work with other Veterans.

(Read Pat's story on page 6)



Inside this issue: Focus on Women Veterans

We highlight the health care services and resources available in VISN 4 for women Veterans throughout every stage of their life.

Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers and friends of VISN 4:

I am very proud that VISN 4 has consistently received the highest trust score in the nation at 94.6% and it continues to trend up. Our network also has the highest number of compliments at 79.3% and the lowest number of concerns at 10.9%.

On April 17, VA announced that Veteran trust in VA outpatient care has increased to 91.8%— up from 85.6% in 2018 (the first year VA began conducting this survey). Veteran trust has increased during each of the past six years. This finding is based on a survey of more than 480,000 Veteran patients who received VA health care in the past 90 days. Within one week of using VA services, these Veterans were asked whether they trusted VA for their health care needs across a variety of categories including scheduling an appointment, health care visits, in-person pharmacy, mail-order pharmacy, labs/imaging, and Veteran safety.

Six VISN 4 medical centers (Altoona, Butler, Erie, Lebanon, Pittsburgh, and Wilkes-Barre) were recognized nationally for making the Top 25 VAMCs for trust scores in VA among Veteran patients. Four of our medical centers ranked in the top five, including the top three facilities nationwide.

As you will read in this issue, VISN 4 is committed to providing high-quality services to women Veterans in a sensitive and safe environment at all our facilities. A dedicated team of women Veteran program managers are available at each VA medical center to assist women Veterans with questions and coordinate services. We are looking forward to serving more women Veterans in the upcoming year.

On behalf of our leadership and staff, I thank all Veterans and their families for entrusting us to provide your health care. It is our honor and privilege to serve you.

Sincerely,

Timothy W. Liezert
Network Director



VA Healthcare-VISN 4 Leadership Team

Timothy W. Liezert
Network Director

Charles R. Thilges
Deputy Network Director

Timothy Burke, M.D.
Chief Medical Officer

Denise Boehm, MSN, RN, NEA-BC
Chief Nursing Officer

Kelly O'Connell
Quality Management Officer

Teresa Waksmonski-Frye
Chief Financial Officer

Amber Mesoras
Chief Human Resources Officer

David E. Cowgill
Communications Manager

Kristy Kralik
Executive Assistant

| I trust [VISN 4 Facility] for my health care needs. | FY 2018 | FY 2024 YTD | Change |
|---|---------|-------------|--------|
| 1. Abie Abraham VA Clinic | 91.6 | 96.6 | +5.0 |
| 2. James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center | 89.5 | 96.5 | +7.0 |
| 3. Erie VA Medical Center | 90.2 | 95.6 | +5.4 |
| 5. Lebanon VA Medical Center | 92.3 | 95.4 | +3.1 |
| 14. VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (UD) | 90.6 | 94.7 | +4.1 |
| 21. Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center | 87.9 | 94.3 | +6.4 |



I CARE represents the core values that define the basic elements of how we go about our work—“who we are”—and form the underlying principles we use every day in our service to Veterans.

VISN 4 established a new, quarterly I CARE award to recognize employees who not only demonstrate our I CARE values, but who go the extra mile to live by our I CARE ideals. There are many wonderful examples of employees demonstrating these values in their day-to-day work.

Integrity • Commitment • Advocacy • Respect • Excellence

FY23 4th Quarter Awardees

Adel Sulejmanovic, Dominick Lisek and John Semple

VA Police

Erie VA Medical Center

Erie VA Police Officers Adel Sulejmanovic, Dominick Lisek, and Police Dispatcher John Semple exemplified our I CARE values by going above and beyond when helping a Veteran in crisis on the Erie VA campus.

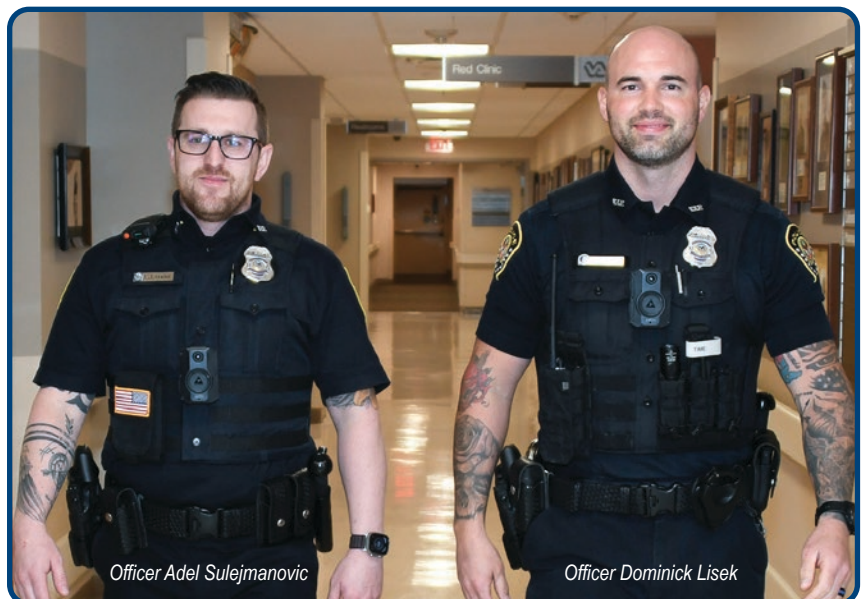
Last year, Erie VA Police received a call from the Veterans Crisis Line. VA Police Officer Sulejmanovic answered the phone and spoke with the operator who stated there was a Veteran with suicidal ideation sitting in a vehicle in the north parking lot. Officers Dominick Lisek and Adel Sulejmanovic quickly responded and located the vehicle. They observed an individual matching the description lying on a reclined driver side seat. They approached the Veteran and attempted to start a dialogue.

Initially, the Veteran refused to speak, was visibly upset, and she began to hit her head on the steering wheel. Officers persisted and were able to stop the Veteran from harming herself, and she began to interact with the officers. She was from out of town and was only here because her sister had recently passed away. She further stated she was very distraught by this and other family issues, and she wanted to kill herself by driving into Lake Erie. She admitted to experiencing suicidal ideation in the past and was not currently taking her prescribed medications.

The officers continued to talk with her and eventually convinced her to seek assistance in the urgent care center. The officers accompanied her into the facility where she was admitted and transferred to a higher level of care. The actions of Officers Lisek and Sulejmanovic prevented a potential loss of life.



Dispatcher John Semple



Officer Adel Sulejmanovic

Officer Dominick Lisek



Women Veterans are a top priority in VISN 4

Women are the fastest-growing group within our Veteran population, and VISN 4 is dedicated to meeting your distinct health care needs, both as a woman and due to your military experiences.

Women Veterans represent a diverse range of individuals, including professionals, mothers, and retirees — spanning different ages, racial backgrounds, ethnicities, gender identities, and sexual orientations. At VA, your women's health care team is dedicated to treating you as an individual and supporting your well-being throughout every stage of your life.

Each woman Veteran is assigned a Women's Health Primary Care Provider. These experienced providers are trained to deliver comprehensive primary care, as well as routine women's health care. You will be at the center of a Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) where a provider, nurse, and others will work with you to manage your health care needs, including:

- **Primary care:** general medical care for acute and chronic conditions, such as chronic pain, high blood pressure and diabetes
- **Preventive care:** immunizations and cancer screenings (breast and cervical), osteoporosis screening and management
- **Gender-specific care:** social, psychological, behavioral, and medical interventions to support and affirm an individual's gender identity
- **Family planning:** birth control, preconception counseling, maternity, lactation consulting and infertility

Across VISN 4, we have dedicated team of Women Veteran Program Managers who are available at each VA medical center to assist women Veterans with questions and coordinate services. They are committed to providing high-quality services in a sensitive and safe environment at all nine VA facilities.

Western Market

- **Altoona**
Susan Yohn, RN
susan.yohn@va.gov
- **Butler**
Rebecca Brown, RN
rebecca.brown15@va.gov
- **Erie**
Nadean Sitter, RN
nadean.sitter@va.gov
- **Pittsburgh**
Nicole McCune, RN
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Eastern Market

- **Coatesville**
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- **Lebanon**
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- **Philadelphia**
Amy Scarano, LCSW
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- **Wilkes-Barre**
Amanda Olaviany, LCSW
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- **Wilmington**
Megan Flemmens, RN
megan.flemmens@va.gov

Because women often have different health care needs than men, we have created resources and services for women to meet these unique needs across their lifespan. Feel free to reach out to a Women Veteran Program Managers at a facility near you. To learn more, visit www.visn4.va.gov/services/women/index.asp.

"Women Veterans continue to be a priority at VA. We are focused on providing holistic care that tends to all the physical, mental and spiritual needs of women. The VA today is not the VA your grandparents went to."

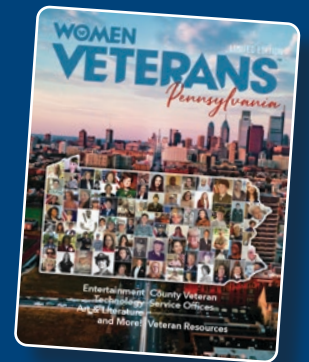


Desmarie J. DeCuir, PhD
Family Nurse Practitioner
Lead Women Veterans Program Manager



Pennsylvania celebrates women Veterans

In conjunction with Women's Veterans Day on June 12, the [Women Veterans Alliance](#) (WVA) is launching a commemorative magazine featuring women Veterans in Pennsylvania. The PA Women Veterans Magazine is accessible both online and in print. You can pick up a free copy at Vet Centers, State Veteran Homes, United Services Organizations, and VA locations statewide while supplies last.



WVA collaborated with the [Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veteran Affairs](#) (DMVA) on this inaugural publication. The magazine is hoping to connect over two million Veterans with the purpose of sharing resources and experiences.

"Know that DMVA will continue to advocate for women resources and access to care," said Brigadier General Maureen Weigl currently serving as Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs in Pennsylvania. "As an advocate for all Veterans, it's important for our federal, state and county agencies to work together in support of Veterans in the Commonwealth."



Be sure to check out the VA spread in the magazine to read more about what women Veterans who are using VA have to say about their care. To find out if you're eligible to enroll in VA health care and benefits, visit a VA facility near you or online at www.va.gov for more information.

A life of service to women Veterans

If you are a fan of the coffee lounge at the Wilmington VA Medical Center, you might be familiar with Patricia “Pat” James-Booker, an Air Force Veteran and loyal VA volunteer with 13 years and over 4,000 hours of volunteer service at Wilmington.

What you might not know is, Pat started a non-profit to support women Veterans as well as widows of Veterans. Veterans In Between (VIB) was started in 2011 to help make sure women Vets are aware of all the different types of programming available to them. The inspiration for the name was to highlight the transition “in between” military and civilian life. The VIB group first started regular meetings to talk about individual needs as well as to socialize with each other and in their community.



In 2012, Pat received an alarming call about her friend and fellow woman Veteran. Her friend was found froze to death because she had been sleeping in her car during a cold winter night. Others knew about her situation but for some reason she was too afraid to admit the hardships she was facing and therefore did not try to go to a shelter. This situation pushed Pat to figure out how VIB can do better to serve all women Veterans who need help. Soon after Pat began opening her home to feed and shelter Veterans experiencing insecurities. Since then, the VIB group addresses Veteran services including homelessness, mental health needs, drug and alcohol treatment and even budgeting assistance.

When the COVID-19 pandemic ended in 2023, Pat herself was facing housing insecurity and possible homelessness. Through her volunteer work at Wilmington VA, Pat had learned about a variety of homeless program offerings available to Veterans at risk of becoming housing insecure. She was fortunate to find a room in a shelter and then she quickly found a rental through the [Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing \(HUD-VASH\)](#) program. During this time, Pat took every precaution to keep her housing situation private and not let it interfere with VIB. Unexpectedly, she ended up inheriting a house from her late father, a U.S. Marine Veteran who inspired her military service, in November. This put an end to her year-long struggle with housing insecurity.

After the new year in 2024, Pat realized she needed to share her experience. She first met with VIB in January and told them what had happened. Everyone knew Pat’s late father who would frequent VIB’s monthly lunches, and they were quite fond of the kindness he had always shown them. They were sad to learn of Frank’s passing but pleased his house would help Pat carry on the VIB legacy. Learn more about Pat’s brush with homelessness on [news.va.gov](#).

The one take-away Pat would like to share with her fellow women Veterans is to always reach out to someone you trust when times are tough. If you decide to tell something deeply personal in confidence, you need to know that person has your back. Pat found solace through the [VA Chaplain Service](#). She feels, regardless of your beliefs, people need a quiet peaceful place just to be still. Sometimes she’d sit in the chapel alone and other times a chaplain was there to listen.

To find out more about the nonprofit group VIB, email VeteransInBetween@yahoo.com or call 302-465-2594.

PACT Act Section 103 Expansion

Elimination of phased eligibility is opening new pathways to VA health care

Now, more than ever, we encourage all who have served in the United States military to apply for VA health care if you meet the basic service and discharge requirements and were exposed to toxins or other hazards while serving our country—at home or abroad.

This expansion of VA health care eliminates the phased-in approach called for by the PACT Act—meaning that millions of Veterans are becoming eligible for VA health care up to eight years earlier than written into law.

The PACT Act is a law that expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange and other toxic substances. This law helps us provide generations of Veterans—and their survivors—with the care and benefits they've earned and deserve.

PACT Act Section 103 expansion is a critical step forward because Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care are proven to have better health outcomes than non-enrolled Veterans, and VA hospitals have dramatically

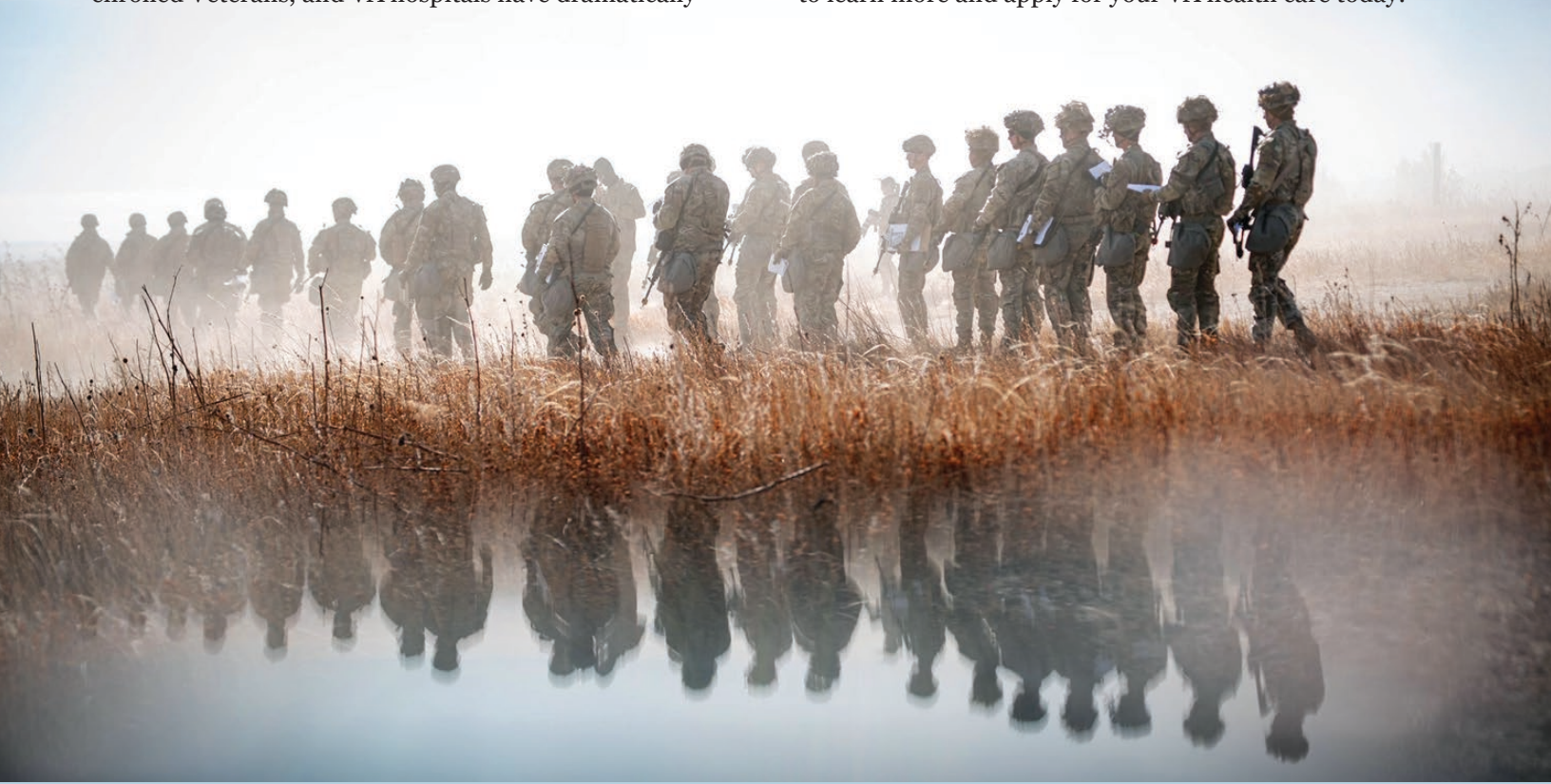
outperformed non-VA hospitals in [overall quality ratings](#) and [patient satisfaction ratings](#). Additionally, VA health care is often [more affordable](#) than non-VA health care for Veterans.

You may be eligible to enroll now—without needing to apply for disability benefits first—when you meet the basic service and discharge requirements and if any of these descriptions below are true for you:

- You served in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, or any other combat zone after 9/11, or
- You deployed in support of the Global War on Terror, or
- You were exposed to toxins or other hazards during military service at home or abroad.

Note: Even if none of these descriptions are true for you, you may still be eligible for VA health care based on your service. Check the full health care eligibility requirements online at <https://www.va.gov/health-care/eligibility/>.

Visit <https://www.va.gov/PACT> or call **1-800-MYVA411** to learn more and apply for your VA health care today.





Keeping you connected to your VA care team

My HealtheVet Transition to VA.gov

My HealtheVet on VA.gov is VA's new Veteran-facing health portal home within VA.gov. This transition will offer you an improved and more accessible experience.

Veterans want and need access to all their VA benefits in one place, especially as laws like the PACT Act expand access to both health care and other benefits. You deserve and expect to be able to access VA's online tools from wherever you are, on whatever device you use, and however you prefer to interact with VA.

The transition within VA.gov is a two-year project expected to be completed October 2024 with all the core features of My HealtheVet being available – including secure messaging, prescription refills, medical records, appointments, and newsletter/health content. Some of these features are currently available on VA.gov to a limited number of Veterans for testing purposes and feedback.

VA Mobile Apps

VA Mobile Health aims to improve your health by providing technologies to expand clinical care beyond the traditional office visit. As part of this initiative, VA is developing secure mobile applications (apps) to support Veterans and VA care teams that increase access, communication, and coordination of care.

If you are enrolled in VA health care, you can use these technologies to be an active participant in your health care and communicate in new ways with your VA care team. Currently, there are 37 apps available for Veterans and 6 apps available for family members and caregivers.

Information and training materials for the VA apps can be found on the VA App Store at <https://mobile.va.gov/appstore>.



Tele Emergency Care saves you time

Need care, but not sure where?

With VISN 4 Tele Emergency Care, help is just a phone call away!

When health issues arise, knowing what kind of care you need can be confusing. Primary care offices, specialists, urgent care centers and emergency departments offer different levels of care. So where should you go?

Simply call 1-833-835-3874 to speak with a nurse and get helpful advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Our team of experienced nurses and emergency medicine providers will quickly assess your needs and recommend the most appropriate care for your condition. In some cases, a quick phone or video appointment can get your health back on track! Best of all, we coordinate with your primary care physician and specialists to make sure your follow up needs are covered.

How does it work?

Veterans receiving health care at VA medical centers throughout VISN 4 can call your main VA medical center and select Option 3 or dial 1-833-835-3874 to speak to a nurse 24/7. There is no appointment necessary and no copayment for your visit.

If your condition can be safely treated virtually, our Tele Emergency Care providers are available 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. 365 days/year to offer rapid phone or video visits. If an in-person visit is necessary, we can recommend the most appropriate level of care for your unique needs.



Conditions that can be managed virtually

Let us help you get the right care! Many conditions can be safely managed with a virtual visit or rapid appointment with our providers without needing a visit to an emergency department:

- Cough, cold, flu and COVID symptoms
- Sore throat
- COPD and asthma flares
- Eye redness & irritation
- Tick and other insect bites
- Rashes
- Skin infections
- Minor allergic reactions
- GI illness
- Urinary tract infections
- Gout flares
- Muscle sprains/strains

Not sure what kind of care you need? A quick call to our triage nurses can help!

Tele Emergency Care supports but does not replace in-person care. If you believe that your condition is life threatening, call 9-1-1 or go to the nearest emergency department.

To learn more about Tele Emergency Care, visit <https://www.visn4.va.gov/tele-urgent>.

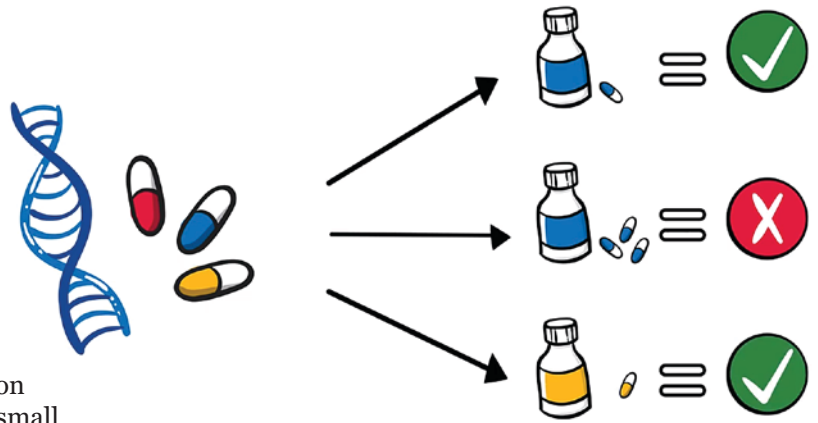
VISN 4 Tele Emergency Care
1-833-835-3874



Scan QR code with your smart phone to add this phone number to your contacts!



Pharmacogenomics: When one size does not fit all



Genes are parts of our DNA that provide instructions on how your body develops and functions. Everyone has small differences in their genes, and because of this, people may respond differently to medicines.

Pharmacogenomics uses information from YOUR genes to help find the right dose and medicine for you. VA now offers a no-cost blood test to patients to understand how your body responds to medicines.

How can the results be beneficial for you?

- Help your provider find a medication that is safe for you
- Decrease side effects
- Reduce the trial-and-error process of medication commonly seen with antidepressants and pain regimens

Medications that can be impacted include:

- Antidepressants
- Pain medications
- Stomach medications
- Cholesterol medications
- And many more

What do I need to know before testing?

- Testing is free for Veterans
- Pharmacogenomics is just one factor that may impact how you respond to a medicine
- Other factors include your age, sex, race, ethnicity, and other medicines you may be taking
- Federal law protects patients from discrimination by insurance companies or employers based on testing results.
- If you have had a liver or certain bone marrow transplants, you are not a candidate for testing

Pharmacogenomic testing is currently available at all VA medical centers and outpatient clinics in VISN 4.

To learn more about pharmacogenomic testing, view a brief video at <https://youtu.be/NGb42dciJPo>.

If you are interested in testing, please speak to your VA health care provider, and never stop taking your medications without first speaking to your provider.



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We'd Like to Hear from You

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