

VA Provides HLAA With Helpful Information for Veterans

BY LUCILLE B. BECK

Hearing Life recently reached out to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with questions so our readers could better understand the hearing health services it offers and how to access them. VA responded with some very helpful information. Here's what they told us.

What can you tell us about Veterans and hearing loss?

Hearing loss is one of the top three service-connected disabilities among Veterans. It impacts approximately 45% of adults older than 65 in the general population. The most common type of hearing loss among Veterans is high-frequency sensorineural hearing loss, which varies in severity from mild to profound. This type of hearing loss is generally caused by noise exposure, age or both, and it causes difficulty distinguishing sounds or understanding speech. The most common treatment for this hearing loss is hearing aids and/or cochlear implants. Audiologists work with Veterans and their families to improve communication by using advanced technologies and extensive counseling. See bit.ly/2XuxaLt.

How do Veterans know if they're entitled to hearing health care benefits and what those benefits are?

Contact your local VA to determine your eligibility and enroll for VA health care.

All Veterans enrolled in the VA health care system are eligible for comprehensive audiology diagnostic evaluations. And VA offers comprehensive care services to Veterans with hearing loss, tinnitus and balance disorders. Employing more than 1,300 audiologists, VA is the largest employer of audiologists in the U.S.

VA audiologists provide a range of clinic services to our nation's Veterans and service members, including hearing screenings, diagnostic hearing evaluations, hearing aid fittings, aural rehabilitation, vestibular (balance) assessment and rehabilitation, tinnitus assessment and rehabilitation, and ototoxic (drug) monitoring.

To receive hearing services through VA, Veterans must first register at the Health Administration/Enrollment Section of the VA medical center of their choice.

The following documents are usually needed at the time of registration:

- A copy of the Veteran's DD214
- Driver's license
- Health insurance, if available

There are several ways to enroll:

- In person at any VA medical center or clinic
- Online by filling out Form 10-10EZ
- By mailing completed Form 10-10EZ to the VA medical center of choice—be sure to sign the application or it can't be processed for enrollment

Once registered, Veterans may schedule an appointment at the Audiology and Speech Pathology Clinic for an evaluation of their hearing. The audiologist will make a clinical determination on the need for hearing aids and/or other hearing assistive devices. If hearing aids are recommended and fitted, the hearing aids, repairs and future batteries will all be at no charge to the Veteran, as long as they maintain VA eligibility for care. See bit.ly/32XJsgv.

Where should Veterans go for hearing testing?

Contact your local VA facility to set up a consultation with an audiologist who can determine your hearing needs and assist you with obtaining the care you need. Many VA facilities offer teleaudiology for those who live far from a VA medical center. To locate the VA audiology clinic closest to you, see www.accesstopwt.va.gov.

Is there an advocate or person who can help Veterans navigate the system?

Veterans who need help getting care or getting problems resolved can talk to the patient advocate at their VA medical center. VA wants to provide world-class Veteran customer service, and this is just one important way in which we do that!

The Patient Advocacy Program is for all Veterans and their families who receive care at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities and clinics. We want to be sure Veterans have someone to go to with concerns in a timely manner and to help them receive care.

Will Veterans need to prove that their hearing problems are service-connected?

Veterans who believe their hearing loss and/or tinnitus resulted from military service should visit their local VA regional office to apply for disability, or visit va.gov/disability/ to see how to apply online.

Are Veterans entitled to hearing health care benefits even if their hearing problems aren't service-connected?

Veterans who qualify for VA health care can receive hearing care. Veterans who think they have a hearing loss should contact their VA audiology clinic directly for an appointment. VA offers comprehensive care services to Veterans with hearing loss, tinnitus and balance disorders.

If a Veteran's hearing problem is service-connected, is the Veteran entitled to a cochlear implant?

Veterans who think they may benefit from a cochlear implant should contact their local VA audiology department. A VA audiologist will perform a comprehensive audiologic evaluation and, if indicated, recommend a referral to a cochlear implant center to determine cochlear implant candidacy. The Veteran will need to have completed a trial with the best possible hearing aids prior to scheduling the referral. The cochlear implant candidacy evaluation will include tests to determine understanding of speech with hearing aids that have been set to obtain optimal performance.

If test results indicate that the Veteran has poor speech understanding while wearing hearing aids, the audiologist will discuss the benefits and risks of a cochlear implant procedure with the Veteran and the family. If the Veteran decides to proceed, an appointment will be scheduled with an ear surgeon who will check for ear and hearing nerve disorders, and determine whether the Veteran is healthy enough to have surgery.

Are hearing problems of spouses or other dependents covered by VA?

As the spouse or dependent child of a Veteran or service member, that spouse or dependent child may qualify for certain benefits such as health care, life insurance, or money to help pay for school or training. As the survivor of a Veteran or service member, you may qualify for added benefits, including help with burial costs and survivor compensation. If you're caring for a Veteran with disabilities, you may also qualify for support to help you better care for the Veteran—and for yourself. See bit.ly/359rQ2E.

VA provides a Caregiver Support Program called CHAMPVA, which provides health care benefits for the

primary family caregiver. Only the designated primary family caregiver who is without health insurance coverage is eligible for CHAMPVA benefits. Some of the health plans that would make a primary family caregiver ineligible for CHAMPVA benefits include TRICARE, Medicare, Medicaid, commercial health plans through employment, and individual plans. Family members also aren't covered. Only the approved primary family caregiver can be eligible for CHAMPVA health care benefits. Not all services are covered under CHAMPVA. Routine hearing exams and hearing aids aren't covered. See bit.ly/34gtYpp.

Are there VA-sponsored support groups for Veterans with hearing problems?

Local VA facilities may offer support groups. HLAA has established the Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter where members communicate via an online platform called Basecamp and hold monthly meetings complete with captions, using Zoom. See hearingloss.org/Veterans or email chapters@hearingloss.org.

Where can Veterans get additional information?

Veterans can call 844.698.2311. If a TTY is used, dial 711 and then the number shown. Or the Veteran can send specific questions through the webpage iris.custhelp.va.gov/app/ask.

Additional information can be found at VA.gov. A directory of where people can find VA on social media is at va.gov/opa/socialmedia.asp.

For VA Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services, see bit.ly/2qqUH3N.

For information on how to apply for VA health care, see va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply/. **HL**

Dr. Lucille B. Beck serves as the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration, where she provides leadership and oversight on health care policy and clinical programs, strategic objectives, Department of Defense/VA interagency efforts, and requirements for legislatively mandated health care delivery programs. She's a recipient of the Presidential Rank Award for Meritorious Executive Service, and the Presidential Rank Award for Distinguished Executive Service. In 2008, she received the Deafness Research Foundation Research and Public Education Award, and in 2016, the HLAA Howard E. "Rocky" Stone Humanitarian Award. She's a founding member and past president of the American Academy of Audiology, and a recipient of its Distinguished Service Award. She's held faculty appointments at Gallaudet University, George Washington University, and the University of Maryland.

