

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Task Force on Research Specific to Pregnant and Lactating Women

Agency Activities: Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Research

VA supports research related to pregnant and lactating women through its intramural research program in the Office of Research and Development, primarily through its Health Services Research and Development Service, which funds research addressing all aspects of VA health care. Women's health research is a priority for the VA, and the VA has established a comprehensive Women's Health Research Agenda (https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/for_researchers/womens_health/default.cfm). This program of research is aimed at understanding the health and healthcare needs of women Veterans and informing systematic improvements in their care through partnerships with the VA healthcare system.

VA supports research on medication safety for pregnant women and their offspring, and research on the effect of military service, trauma, and co-occurring conditions on reproductive health and pregnancy, health care delivery, and care coordination. VA scientists have also contributed to the basic science literature related to pregnancy-associated conditions. Some specific examples include:

- Through the Pregnancy Outcomes of Veterans (PROVE) project, scientists are linking VA and California data to describe the effect of maternal PTSD on birth outcomes, confirming an increased risk of preterm birth and quantifying the distribution and character of preterm births.
- Researchers are assessing the coordination of pregnancy care experienced by women veterans by examining health care utilization data and interviewing women veterans and their health care providers.
- Researchers have assessed counseling of female veterans about the teratogenic risks of prescription medications and are testing new programs to enhance provider-patient communication about these risks.

Clinical Care

VA provides health care services to pregnant and lactating women veterans, usually in the community but also through the Veterans' Health Administration (VHA). All VHA medical centers have a maternity care coordinator who assists pregnant women veterans with coordinating VA and community resources for prenatal care and delivery, and ensures that women veterans receive appropriate lactation support and screening for post-partum depression. VA researchers have documented a significant recent increase in the utilization of VA maternity benefits among eligible women veterans. Moreover, another VA-supported study found that women who use VA benefits tend to be at higher risk, especially for depression, compared with women who do not use these benefits. VA provides counseling or mental health services, substance abuse counseling and/or treatment, and training for providers specifically related to the needs of pregnant or lactating women.

Related to its health care services programs, VA provides policies, regulations, and guidance related to the health impacts of therapies on pregnant and lactating women and their offspring. These policies and guidance help women and their clinicians make informed decisions about medication in pregnancy. Examples include:

- VA's Pharmacy Benefit Management Program includes decision tools to help women and their physicians make informed decisions when they prescribe medication for pregnant or lactating women. VA formularies and decision aids are based on information from FDA and from NLM's LactMed.
- VA's Teratogenic Drugs Project is an information technology initiative that enhances VHA's electronic medical records system to display pregnancy and lactation information in the vital signs display; implements automatic order checks for medication and imaging studies; includes notification to providers about potential teratogenic medications; and provides reminders to providers addressing pregnancy and lactation status.
- VA and DoD have together implemented a clinical practice guideline on management of pregnancy { https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/WH/up/mpg_v2_1_full.pdf }. The guideline is designed to: reduce clinical practice variation; provide evidence-based recommendations to patients and providers; and identify outcome measures to improve clinical practice.
- VHA's Handbook established procedures for the coordination of maternity care for veterans.

Communications

VA's website provides an array of resources to pregnant and lactating women and their health care providers. VA seeks to inform a wide range of audiences about medication use and safety among pregnant and lactating women (<https://www.pregnancyatoz.org>; https://www.tucson.va.gov/docs/WomenHealth/Maternity_Care_Benefits_08052015.pdf). VA's communication activities related to pregnancy and lactation include:

- The Purple Book is a resource for pregnant patients to help explain VA's and DoD's evidence-based practices for pregnancy care {https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/providers/VHA_CC-Provider_Toolkit.pdf and <https://www.tucson.va.gov/services/women/Maternity.asp> }
- MomMoodBooster, a free online program for women veterans designed to help women veterans recover from postpartum depression. In addition to online information, women complete six sessions and receive phone calls from a phone coach to assist in their recovery (<https://mummoodbooster.com/public/us>).
- As part of its women's health continuing education webinar series, VA has sponsored webinars on the use of medications during pregnancy.
- As part of VA's training web site, pregnancy-related information is available to VA providers (https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/providers/VHA_CC-Provider_Toolkit.pdf and <https://www.tucson.va.gov/services/women/Maternity.asp>).

Other Collaborative Efforts

Collaborations noted above include VA's work with DoD on practice guidelines. VA also collaborates with federal, state, and local governments, community-based care organizations, professional societies and others on issues related to research and clinical care for pregnant and lactating women. For example, VA served as a member of CDC's Preconception Health and Health Care Committee, which issued recommendations to improve preconception health to prevent adverse pregnancy outcomes (<https://www.cdc.gov/preconception/documents/actionplannationalinitiativepchhc2012-2014.pdf>).