

# Welcome Home: Returning Soldiers' Health Needs Must Be Assessed

December 22, 2011

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Do you think the health of U.S. war veterans is a national priority? Well, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does. The agency's new [report](#)—published in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*—should sound an alarm throughout the country. According to the report's findings, vets from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars may be at higher risk for tobacco addiction, extreme weight gain and obesity, which are major risk factors for chronic health problems such as cancer, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

For the report, researchers from Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers across the country compared the chronic disease risk behaviors of recent veterans with those of the general population. The results? For starters, veterans used much more tobacco. In 2008, for example, about 33 percent of active duty military personnel surveyed said they'd smoked in the past month, which compares with less than 20 percent of the U.S. adults in the general population. What's more, vets deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan were 50 percent more likely to use tobacco-based products than their military peers who did not deploy.

In addition, 14 percent of active duty service members said they used smokeless tobacco, such as chewing tobacco, dip or snuff—products that are as addictive as cigarettes and can cause gum disease, oral or throat cancer and heart disease. Meanwhile, only 3 percent of the general population used these goods.

For the battle of the bulge, one large study of people in the military collected information from 2001 to 2003 and again from 2004 to 2006. Findings showed that nearly half the participants, many who deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq, experienced extreme weight gain. Scientists also noted that weight gain and obesity are linked to sensitivity to stress, depression, substance and alcohol abuse and sleep loss—all common conditions among some young veterans.

But there's a silver lining, doctors said. Military culture values physical fitness, and veterans are more likely to engage in strength training exercise. In addition, the strong sense of camaraderie and community prevalent in military life may be beneficial to young veterans who want to adopt healthier lifestyles, researchers said.

Ultimately, scientists want to use VA infrastructure to provide services for soldiers interested in adopting healthy behaviors when they return from war. The payoff? Veterans' long-term health.

When Iraq war veteran Shoshana Johnson—the nation’s first black female prisoner of war—returned home, she suffered from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health disorder. [Click here](#) to read her story.

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