

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Assessment of Rates of Overweight and Obesity and Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Depression in a Sample of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans

Barber, J., Bayer, L., Pietrzak, R. H., & Sanders, K. A. (2011). Assessment of rates of overweight and obesity and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression in a sample of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans. *Military Medicine*, 176(2), 151-155. doi:10.7205/milmed-d-09-00275

SUMMARY: Medical records of Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) with established routine care within Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers were examined to investigate the potential relationships between weight and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Findings suggest that no relationship exists between PTSD or depression symptoms and being measured as overweight or obese.

KEY FINDINGS:

- No relationship was found between measures of weight (Body Mass Index [BMI]) and brief positive screens for PTSD or depression.
- Veterans within the sample group had higher overweight rates but lower obesity rates than the general U.S. civilian population.
- Approximately a quarter of males in the sample were obese or morbidly obese while only about 15% of females fell within the obese/morbidly obese category.
- Nearly half of the males and approximately one-third of the female Veterans in the sample fell within the overweight category.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Tailor efforts to Service members that are at a high risk for development of weight problems as time passes
- Focus on continuing maintenance of Service member health over time, particularly in regard to weight and psychological well-being
- Assessment of rates of overweight and obesity and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression in a sample of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs designed to promote and maintain healthy lifestyles in Service members, especially in terms of weight and psychological well-being
- Continue to support ongoing and expanded programs of research examining the long-term development of health issues in Service members in relation to weight and psychological distress
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and community-based programs to offer military families opportunities to engage in family friendly physical activities together

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METHODS

- Retrospective chart reviews of 1,565 archived medical records from the West Haven Veterans Affairs (VA) were used to extract measurements of height and weight (body mass index or BMI) as well as data from PTSD and depression screenings for OEF/OIF Veterans.
- Veterans were classified into BMI categories using conventional cut-offs: normal (

PARTICIPANTS

- The records of 1,553 Veterans who served in OEF or OIF and visited the VA Connecticut Healthcare System- West Haven between October 1, 2006 and March 31, 2008 were reviewed and included in the final analysis.
- Veterans' chosen for inclusion in the study had at least one PTSD or depression screen documented on their medical record.
- The sample was 87% male; with an average age of 32.6 years old (SD = 8.79).

LIMITATIONS

- Selected participants may differ from nonparticipants in ways that were not measured but affected the outcome such as deployment length, number of months since deployment, location, amount of combat exposure, number of deployments, rank, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.
- Given that the participants were Veterans seeking care at one VA facility, results may not generalize to other samples or the Veteran population at large.
- The mental health variables used screening measures which are not as accurate as full measures or clinical interviews.
- The measure of BMI has been criticized as not being an accurate assessment of being overweight and is not associated with health risks in a clear manner.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Further examine the evidence that gender potentially moderates the relationship between weight and psychological distress, possibly resulting in gender-specific health outcomes
- Utilize a longitudinal design to explore the possibility that associations observed between weight and psychological distress may require more time to surface, and may change over time
- Investigate the researchers' theory that Veterans from current conflicts may be at elevated risk for becoming overweight or obese

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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