Got Pain? DVAHCS Rheumatology Clinic Can Help

Jumping out of airplanes with many pounds of equipment, running in heavy combat gear, and being jostled in vehicles traversing rough terrain are just part of the job for many members of the military. However, those same kinds of activities, when they damage – or simply place high amounts of extra strain on – joints can be contributing factors for a type of “silent” injury you wouldn’t suspect for members of the military: painful and other debilitating osteoarthritis that can affect even those who are in their 20s and 30s. And the problem, according to medical researchers, is steadily getting worse. While 1 in 4 Americans now have arthritis, 1 in 3 Veterans are affected.

In addition, CDC data show that about 1 in 2 Veterans Administration healthcare users report having arthritis (twice the rate of the US population). Of that group more than ½ reports that the disease limits their daily activities.

“Our mission at Rheumatology has expanded over the years,” says Dr. Steven Sorian, a Clinic Rheumatologist at the DVAHCS. “Not only do we treat arthritis in all its forms, but we also treat gout, lupus and a wide variety of diseases that affect the joints.”

For those patients that suffer from arthritis and other joint related diseases, there is a wide variety of treatments available. Over the counter medications and rub-ons like Motrin and Icey-Hot are proven to be helpful. For more severe cases surgery or prescriptions may be necessary. Lifestyle changes can also help with the treatment process.

“If possible, we tell our patients to try to be as active as their arthritis allows,” explains Dr. Sorian. “Walking and simple hand exercises can help. If you are overweight, a good weight loss program helps, especially with problems related to gout. Also, if a person smokes they have a higher chance of suffering from Rheumatoid Arthritis, so quitting will certainly help. Good health and everything in moderation is the key.”

For questions about Rheumatological diseases and treatment please visit https://www.research.va.gov/topics/arthritis.cfm.
For Veterans who struggle with life issues, the Durham VA Health Care System have specialists in place to help Veterans cope overcome life’s obstacles. These Peer Support Specialists provide emotional support for issues ranging from substance abuse to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Military Sexual Trauma (MST).

The program was established by President Barak Obama in 2008 to help with the influx of Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The DVAHCS Peer Support Program sees considerable success in helping Veterans in crisis. While many hospitals in the private sector offer peer support services, the VA is unique in that all Peer Support Specialists are Veterans themselves. Often, these specialists have struggled with same issues affecting their Veteran patients, which helps build a bond between the mentor and the mentee.

“As peer support specialists, we provide the resources to help stabilize the Veteran and get them back on their feet,” says Iretha Alston a DVAHCS peer support specialist. “We don’t judge, we don’t dictate. We involve the Veteran in their own care. For example, a Veteran with substance abuse issues comes to see me. I could order them to attend counseling and sobriety meetings, but that’s not how we work. I share my own experiences with substance abuse and mental health issues and try to get the message through that way. It takes time and a lot of effort, but it works.”

All peer support specialists must be a Veteran. They also must be a Veteran in recovery, be it either substance abuse or mental health and must be at least a year clean and sober or out of hospitalization. While you are apprenticing, candidates can receive training through the UNC-Chapel Hill peer support specialist program. For those looking to help their fellow Veterans, this the perfect job. In fact, there are few jobs where being a bit rough around the edges is a plus.

“I love peer support,” says Ms. Alston. “I’ve had an opportunity to take other positions here and I’ve refused. When I have a Veteran in crisis sitting across from me, I see a bit of myself as well. That was me at one point. I’m not just helping these Veteran recover, they’re helping me as well. That’s the beauty of peer support.”

To learn more about Peer Support at the DVAHCS, please call Ms. Iretha Alston at (919) 286-0411 EXT: 5318 or iretha.alston@va.gov