

PTSD a medical warning sign for long-term health problems

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Geisinger research finds that veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are as likely to have long-term health problems as people with chronic disease risk factors such as an elevated white blood cell counts and biological signs and symptoms. However, few healthcare providers screen for PTSD in the same way as they screen for other chronic disease risk factors.

“Exposure to trauma has not only psychological effects, but can take a serious toll on a person’s health status and biological functions as well,” Geisinger Senior Investigator Joseph Boscarino, PhD, MPH says. “PTSD is a risk factor for disease that doctors should put on their radar screens.”

For this study, Dr. Boscarino examined the health status of 4,462 male Vietnam-era veterans 30 years after their military service. Results are being published in the current edition of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*.

The study finds that having PTSD was just as good an indicator of a person’s long-term health status as having an elevated white blood cell count. An elevated white blood cell count can indicate a major infection or a serious blood disorder such as leukemia.

The study also found that veterans with high erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR), which indicates inflammation, were also at risk. There was a similar finding for a possible indicator of serious neuroendocrine problems.

While these disease markers are measured with a blood test, PTSD is commonly measured with a psychological test or a mental health examination.

This research comes as Geisinger is organizing a national conference on May 13 to address PTSD in combat veterans from rural parts of the country.

Boscarino says that almost anyone who experiences a traumatic event can experience PTSD, meaning accident and disaster victims are also predisposed to the biological risk factors associated with PTSD.

Although therapy doesn't necessarily have to be extensive, Boscarino says it should occur shortly after a person has experienced a traumatic event. Early treatment may be critical to avoiding depression, PTSD and substance abuse-related problems following trauma.

“As the conflicts in the Middle East continue, we’re seeing a new wave of our service members who have posttraumatic stress,” says Boscarino, a Vietnam veteran. “If we don’t get these personnel help earlier, our research shows that they may experience more serious health problems down the road.”

Source: Geisinger Health System

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