

Summary: Women Veterans are the fastest growing Veteran population and the number of women Veterans using Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare has nearly doubled in the past 10 years.^{1,2} Women Veterans may have elevated risk for cancer compared to non-Veteran women, and the percentage diagnosed with cancer is increasing.³ However, little is known about women Veterans' unique experiences, needs, and preferences related to cancer care. New programs and initiatives, such as the VA COURAGE center, are addressing this knowledge gap and expanding opportunities for research that supports high-quality cancer care for women Veterans.

What we know:

- Women Veterans may have elevated risk of cancer compared to non-Veteran women because of reproductive history (e.g., delayed age of first birth); chemical exposures during deployment (e.g., to volatile organic compounds), and mental health conditions (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder)⁴
- Breast cancer is the most common cancer for women Veterans diagnosed at VA, followed by cancers of the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and gynecological systems³
- VA outperforms non-VA healthcare systems in breast cancer screening rates, with 87% of eligible women receiving mammograms,⁵ but barriers to VA screening and treatment persist (e.g., wait times, driving distance, lack of women's health providers, lack of local mammography services)⁶
- Some women Veterans receive cancer care outside VA due to a lack of local VA breast and gynecologic cancer services and recent legislation expanding access to non-VA care⁷

What we still need to know:

A review of literature on women Veterans' cancer care⁷ shows information gaps in:

- Estimated prevalence of women Veterans with cancer and number seeking VA cancer care
- Women Veterans' experiences and preferences related to cancer care (e.g., in-person vs. telehealth; VA vs. community care)
- Impact of conditions that are overrepresented among women Veterans (e.g., toxic exposures, military sexual trauma, mental health conditions) on cancer and cancer care
- Cancer-related outcomes (e.g., survival rates, quality of life)
- Cancer survivorship and end of life care

What is being done:

Recent initiatives expand opportunities for women Veterans' cancer care and research

- The Breast and Gynecologic System of Excellence (BGSoE; launched in 2021) improves access to breast and gynecologic cancer care for women Veterans, including telehealth and a comprehensive cancer navigation and support program^{8,9}
- VA convened its first Women's Cancer Research Conference (2023) to better understand breast cancer testing and treatment referral patterns and identify future research priorities¹⁰

(continued on next page)

The newly-established COURAGE center builds evidence to support high-quality cancer care^{8,9}

- The VA COURAGE center (launched in 2023) evaluates evidence to support high-quality cancer care to women Veterans and address sex differences in care delivery
- COURAGE works in partnership with BGSoE, serving as an evaluation and capacity-building arm
- Initial objectives of COURAGE include evaluating VA care experiences of women Veterans with cancer and identifying research gaps and evaluation needs

Funded VA Women's Cancer Research Projects

Access, delivery, and value of care for Veterans with breast cancer. (Erin Bayley, MD, MSc, VA National Oncology Program funded, July 2025- June 2027). This project will investigate patterns in breast cancer care delivered to women Veterans and describe factors that impact high-value breast cancer care. *For more information:* Erin.Bayley@va.gov

Predicting the breast cancer risk for women Veterans. (Shiuh-Wen Luoh, MD, PhD, VA BLRD funded, Jan 2019- Dec 2020). This project evaluated clinical and genetic-based breast cancer prediction models in a cohort of women from the Million Veteran Program. *For more information:* Shiuh-Wen.Luoh@va.gov

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For More Information:

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WHRN Research in Motion summaries highlight emerging research related to women Veterans' health and healthcare and are not intended to represent all VA Office of Research and Development (ORD) studies or findings.

Recommended citation: Fenwick KM, Zullig LL, Goldstein KM. Women Veterans' cancer care research: building evidence for high-quality care. *VA Women's Health Research Network (WHRN; VA HSR SDR 10-012)*. 2025.