

Chronic Pain and Substance Use among Women Veterans:

PROJECT SUMMARY

Women experience more severe and recurrent chronic pain than men and are disproportionately affected by various chronic pain conditions. Women Veterans are more likely to report chronic pain, depression, and anxiety. However, barriers remain for women Veterans and former servicewomen seeking care for chronic pain. As one of the fastest growing populations of Veterans and active service members, it is critical that resources are developed that reflect their specific needs and circumstances. This project created evidence-based resources for women Veterans and their health care providers that reflect women Veterans' experiences with chronic pain, trauma, and substance use.



15	7	20 - 29	13
Women Veterans interviewed	Substances reported	Average number of years living in pain	Women using substances for pain management at the time of interview

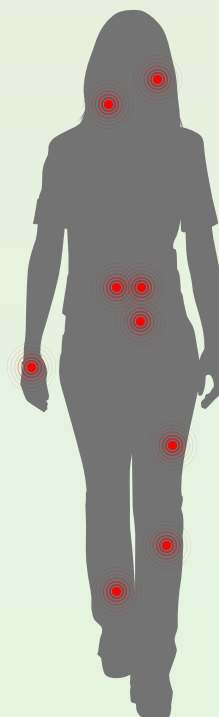
What We Heard

Experiences of chronic pain as women Veterans

Most Veterans interviewed reported musculoskeletal pain that was connected to their military service. Some injuries resulted from training and/or from the prolonged use of equipment, such as boots, that were not designed for women's bodies. For many women, the physical pain could not be divorced from experiences of trauma.

Limited access to health and social services

Long waitlists, short appointment times, stigma, a lack of women-centered and Veteran-specific supports, and insufficient information were widely reported as multi-level barriers to care.



"It's really hard living with chronic pain and feeling like your body was taken away from you."

Substance use for pain management

All participants shared that they used substances at one point for pain management. Many women Veterans expressed that because of co-existing chronic pain, trauma, and PTSD, it was often difficult to know if the substance was helping reduce their pain or quieting the trauma. Only some women felt comfortable speaking to their healthcare providers about the substances. Few received insight from their providers on how to safely use the substance, or find alternatives, for pain management.

Resiliency, self-advocacy, and desired supports

Despite the many challenges they faced, women Veterans continued to advocate for their health by seeking pain management strategies that worked for them. A need was articulated for relational practice and services that are trauma- and gender-informed, holistic, and tailored specifically to their needs as women Veterans living with chronic pain.

What We Developed

Resources for women Veterans and their healthcare providers on:

- why women experience chronic pain
- information about substance use and pain management
- grounding and trauma-informed practice
- pain management strategies
- where to find support

