

Texas Obesity Research Center

Correlates of Military Sexual Trauma, Mental Health, and Obesity among Women Veterans

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Obesity is a growing concern for Veterans Affairs (VA) providers of women Veterans as recent evidence suggests that females more than males have a higher prevalence of obesity. Further, women Veterans present to VA with rates of military sexual trauma (MST) that exceed prevalence rates in the civilian population. Research findings support the tenet that disorder eating, and adverse health outcomes are consequences of sexual trauma. However, the mental health correlates of MST and obesity have not been well established. One recent study of returning combat Veterans found that obesity is a significant concern. This purpose of the current study is to examine and describe the prevalence of obesity in a sample of women Veterans seeking treatment for MST and to examine the correlates of obesity in this population with symptom and behavioral measures. **Methods:** Women Veterans positive for MST (n=177) voluntarily admitted to a VA inpatient psychiatric unit were prospectively recruited for participation in an IRB approved study. Clinician administered and self-report measures of mental health symptom severity (depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorders), social support, and resiliency were collected. Body Mass Index (BMI) was gathered at admission and tests of statistical significance were conducted with the Pearson Chi-square for categorical variables and with ANOVAs for the continuous variables. **Results:** In the current sample, women ranged in age from 20 to 65 years (M=42.6, SD=10.3), were likely to be unmarried, unemployed, and to have complex histories of traumatic experiences prior to entering the military. Half of the participants had one or more suicide attempts in the past year. Obese and morbidly obese women (n=83, 43%) were more likely to report child sexual assault and adult rape (not MST) than overweight or healthy normals, $\chi^2(3) = 8.34, p < .05$. Extreme obesity (BMI>40) was correlated with poorer social support, greater difficulties with emotion regulation, and less perceived resiliency. **Conclusions:** Women

veterans have extensive traumatic histories of interpersonal violence and sexual trauma that appear to be positively correlated with obesity.

KEY WORDS: Obesity, Military Sexual Trauma, Women Veterans, Mental Health, Resiliency, Social Support