



Highlights of [GAO-04-1069](#), a report to the Ranking Democratic Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is caused by an extremely stressful event and can develop after the threat of death or serious injury as in military combat. Experts predict that about 15 percent of servicemembers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan will develop PTSD. Efforts by VA to inform new veterans, including Reserve and National Guard members, about the expanded availability of VA health care services could result in an increased demand for VA PTSD services. GAO identified the approaches DOD uses to identify servicemembers at risk for PTSD and examined if VA has the information it needs to determine whether it can meet an increase in demand for PTSD services. GAO visited military bases and VA facilities, reviewed relevant documents, and interviewed DOD and VA officials to determine how DOD identifies servicemembers at risk for PTSD, and what information VA has to estimate demand for VA PTSD services.

What We Recommend

GAO recommends that VA determine the total number of veterans receiving VA PTSD services and provide facility-specific information to VA medical facilities and Vet Centers. VA concurred with GAO's recommendation and plans to aggregate data on the total number of veterans it treats for PTSD at VA facilities. DOD concurred with GAO's findings and conclusions.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1069.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101.

VA AND DEFENSE HEALTH CARE

More Information Needed to Determine If VA Can Meet an Increase in Demand for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Services

What GAO Found

DOD uses two approaches to identify servicemembers at risk for PTSD: the combat stress control program and the post-deployment health assessment questionnaire. The combat stress control program trains servicemembers to recognize the early onset of combat stress, which can lead to PTSD. Symptoms of combat stress and PTSD include insomnia, nightmares, and difficulties coping with relationships. To assist servicemembers in the combat theater, teams of DOD mental health professionals travel to units to reinforce the servicemembers' knowledge of combat stress symptoms and to help identify those who may be at risk for combat stress and PTSD. DOD also uses the post-deployment health assessment questionnaire to identify physical ailments and mental health issues commonly associated with deployments, including PTSD. The questionnaire includes the following four screening questions that VA and DOD mental health experts developed to identify servicemembers at risk for PTSD:

Have you ever had any experience that was so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that, in the past month, you

- have had any nightmares about it or thought about it when you did not want to?
- tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that remind you of it?
- were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?
- felt numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings?

VA lacks the information it needs to determine whether it can meet an increase in demand for VA PTSD services. VA does not have a count of the total number of veterans currently receiving PTSD services at its medical facilities and Vet Centers—community-based VA facilities that offer trauma and readjustment counseling. Without this information, VA cannot estimate the number of new veterans its medical facilities and Vet Centers could treat for PTSD. VA has two reports on the number of veterans it currently treats, with each report counting different subsets of veterans receiving PTSD services. Veterans who are receiving VA PTSD services may be counted in both reports, one of the reports, or not included in either report. VA does receive demographic information from DOD, which includes home addresses of servicemembers that could help VA predict which medical facilities or Vet Centers servicemembers may access for health care. By assuming that 15 percent or more of servicemembers who have left active duty status will develop PTSD, VA could use the home zip codes of servicemembers to broadly estimate the number of servicemembers who may need VA PTSD services and identify the VA facilities located closest to their homes. However, predicting which veterans will seek VA care and at which facilities is inherently uncertain, particularly given that the symptoms of PTSD may not appear for years.