

Study: Alternative therapy popular with troops

Prayer tops list of treatments

By Patricia Kime - Staff writer

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Rebecca Halstead became an advocate for alternative medical treatments such as chiropractic care and nutrition supplements after being diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 2005.

But while the retired Army brigadier general found solutions on her own for her chronic pain and inflammation, she is surprised by new research that shows troops use alternative medical therapies at higher rates than their civilian counterparts.

“How do they find out about it and pay for it?” she said, noting complementary and alternative medicine, or CAM, “was not a high priority when I was in the military.”

A new study in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* indicates active-duty members use some alternative therapies for stress reduction at rates up to seven times higher than civilians.

And among both troops and civilians, the most popular complementary medical therapy is prayer.

But troops also turn to massage therapy, meditation and guided imagery therapy — a treatment that focuses on positive or soothing mental images to promote relaxation — more than their civilian counterparts, according to the study.

The reasons are unclear, researchers say.

“It could be because people in the military have a lot of incentive to stay fit, or they are more in situations of high stress,” said Christine Goertz, the lead study author and vice chancellor of research and health policy at Palmer College. “They also have higher rates of musculoskeletal injuries, which can be treated with chiropractic. It may be a combination of all of these things.”

The Army-backed study sought to understand use of alternative therapies among troops to determine whether additional research is needed.

The therapies “are widely understudied,” Goertz said, even though troops are using a “wide range” of them.

According to the study, more than 55 percent of those surveyed reported using CAM in the previous year, including prayer. Once prayer is removed from the list, 44 percent of troops reported CAM use, while 36 percent of civilians said they had tried nontraditional medical treatments.

Of the therapies cited in the survey, one is offered consistently through the military health system — chiropractic care — and is available at about half of the military treatment facilities.

Service members may be more drawn to these therapies because they often are conducted outside traditional mental health clinics or performed by civilian practitioners not involved in military health care — which could mean troops turn to CAM to sidestep the stigma associated with mental health care, retired Col. Elspeth Ritchie, a former Army psychiatrist, wrote in the journal *Psychiatric Annals* in January.

Halstead said she is encouraged by the study's results.

“When I was diagnosed, I received several prescriptions for pain, including for two antidepressants. I thought the doctor had made a mistake because I wasn't depressed. He said, ‘Maybe not now, but you will be.’”

After seeing a chiropractor and following a strict diet that includes whole food supplements, Halstead takes no prescription medications.

“People say CAM is not well-researched and it's expensive,” she said. “But what is the cost of not doing it?”
