

## Module 4: Veteran Personal Care



For many Veterans, disabling injuries such as spinal cord injuries, amputations and traumatic brain injuries may make it difficult to perform some of the basic activities we all do every day, such as eating, bathing, dressing, using the toilet, or moving from one position to another.

You may wonder if the Veteran you care for is able to handle routine, everyday tasks independently. If not, when and how can you help? What services or products are useful? Do you need special training to assist?

This module will focus on answering these questions about the personal care of the Veteran you provide care for.

## Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)

The term “**activities of daily living**”, or ADLs, refers to the basic tasks of everyday life, such as eating, bathing, dressing, toileting and transferring.

The ability to perform ADLs impacts one’s ability to live independently. An assessment of ADLs provides important information on the functional abilities of the Veteran to assess his/her progress in rehabilitation and identify the personal assistive devices that will be needed at home. This assessment also helps the Caregiver by identifying the activities the Veteran can perform independently. For those activities where the Veteran will need assistance—an ADL assessment will help you to know how much assistance is needed while promoting the Veteran’s independence.

VA nurses, case managers, physical therapists and occupational therapists complete assessments of activities of daily living and will work with you and the Veteran in any areas of need.

## Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs)

IADLs refer to a series of more complex tasks or functions that help maintain one’s personal life and environment, for example: shopping for food, cooking, doing laundry, housecleaning, managing money, managing medications, driving/using public transportation, or using the phone.



## What are Compensatory Skills?

**Compensatory skills** are techniques or strategies that will help the Veteran you care for to find new ways to accomplish activities of daily living. Some examples of compensatory skills are:

- ★ Training and adaptation to handle activities such as dressing, bathing, toileting, grooming and feeding.
- ★ Creating or identifying new methods to complete tasks in a way that accommodates changes in the Veteran's abilities.
- ★ Helping the Veteran to relearn basic skills like cooking and grooming that may have been lost due to injuries such as TBI.
- ★ Training and adaptation for activities such as shopping, running errands or handling finances.
- ★ Working with employers and/or schools to adapt the work or home environment so the Veteran is able to do his or her best.
- ★ Helping to identify and develop healthy, fulfilling hobbies or other activities if he or she can't return to work.



Physical and occupational therapists will help identify which compensatory skills would be the best fit for the Veteran's specific needs. They will teach you and the Veteran to develop these skills.

## Tips to Help with Daily Activities

The goal, as always, is to maximize the Veteran's and your safety, confidence, independence and ability to handle everyday activities. Try these helpful tips:

- ★ As a first step, ask the Veteran which activities or goals he or she wants to accomplish, and how you might help.
- ★ Understand the Veteran's formal ADL or IADL assessment and identified needs. Being familiar with the assessment will help you and the VA staff to find appropriate resources and set up a plan of care that's best for the Veteran and for you. Remember that every situation is different and solutions that work for some people might not work in your situation.
- ★ Aim for a flexible approach to care. The Veteran's needs may change over time and the help you provide as a Caregiver will change as well.
- ★ Talk with the Primary Care Team. You are the authority on the Veteran's life at home. If you feel that the Veteran's abilities are getting weaker, if you notice a change in behavior, or if a certain service is needed, let the healthcare team know.
- ★ Learn about the resources that are available to help the Veteran, such as VA-provided home care services. These services not only will assist the Veteran, but also could provide *you* with a break or respite from your care responsibilities.

## Transferring

If the Veteran needs to be moved from one spot to another, for example from the wheelchair to the bed, it's wise to close the gap as much as possible first and make the situation stable. You can take the chair close to the bed, and then lock the brakes and move armrests and footrests out of the way.

Encourage the Veteran to help with the lift as much as possible. Whether or not the Veteran is able to help, you, as Caregiver, can explain what's about to happen before you start.

To prevent back injury **assume the proper lifting stance**. A good general stance for lifting is:

- ★ A straight back.
- ★ Feet about a shoulder width apart with one foot placed slightly in front of the other.

Some Veterans may be eligible for home lifting devices. You may want to discuss this with your Primary Care Team. If issued a home lifting device, you will want to get training in using it. It's important to ask questions if you don't understand.



## Assistive Devices that Can Help the Veteran

**Assistive devices** are items or products that maintain or improve the abilities and independence of someone with disabilities. Some familiar devices include:

- ★ Walkers
- ★ Canes
- ★ Manual or motorized wheelchairs
- ★ Grab bars near the toilet, shower and bathtub
- ★ Shower/bath chairs
- ★ Pill boxes
- ★ Hearing aids
- ★ Scoop plates and weighted utensils for easier feeding
- ★ Reachers for getting items in hard to reach locations

There are more sophisticated assistive devices as well, including:

**Automatic medication dispensers**—some with timers and alarms.

**Environmental Control Units (ECUs)** —can assist with actions such as turning on lights and fans, controlling a telephone or using a computer. May be voice-activated.

**Lifts** —can be ceiling-mounted or portable units, such as a Hoyer Lift. These help you move the Veteran from a bed to a chair; or from room to room; or from bedroom to shower, for example. A variety of slings are available to make sure the move is safe and comfortable.

**Ramps** —can be constructed as a permanent structure for your home or be a modular, temporary structure. In either case, ramps make it easier to move the Veteran in and out of your home. Portable ramps can be stored in your car and used when going into other homes or buildings that are not wheelchair-accessible.



**Vehicle adaptations and transportation assistance**—van modifications such as a ramp or raised roof, adaptive hand controls, wheelchair and scooter lifts; Paratransit (flexible transportation such as shared taxis).



**Attendant Controls**—can be fitted to any power wheelchair. These allow you to easily guide the Veteran’s wheelchair.

**Electronic Devices**—special phones, computers that “speak” or enlarge text, voice-activated devices, personal digital assistants with audible prompts for tasks/events/activities. There continue to be many new and ingenious products in the marketplace that may help the Veteran.

**Work-based Devices**—in addition to home-based assistive devices, a variety of computer and non-computer-based products are available to help the Veteran in the workplace.

### **Home Modifications**

Modifying your home can increase the Veteran’s self-reliance, make care a little easier and help reduce the stress you may experience as a Caregiver. Home modifications can include:

- ★ Lowered countertops
- ★ A roll-in shower
- ★ Enlarged doorways to fit a wheelchair
- ★ Lowered light switches and heating/AC controls
- ★ Lever doorknobs instead of round knobs



Staff from the VA can assist you and the Veteran in identifying devices and modifications that are most appropriate for your specific needs. Included below under “Resources” are VA programs that provide assistive devices and home modifications, including financial assistance.

## VA Housing Grants and Loans

- ★ The **Specially Adapted Housing Grant (SAH)** is generally used to create a wheelchair-accessible home for those who may require it for activities of daily living.
- ★ VA's **Home Loan Guaranty Program** and the **Native American Direct Loan Program** may also be used with the SAH benefit to purchase an adaptive home.
- ★ The **Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) Grant** is generally used to assist Veterans with mobility throughout their homes due to blindness in either eyes, anatomical loss or loss of use of both hands or extremities below the elbow.
- ★ The **Temporary Residence Adaptation (TRA)** grant is available to eligible Veterans and seriously injured active duty Servicemembers who are temporarily living or intend to temporarily live in a home owned by a family member.

## Resources & References

- ★ Information on all VA housing grants and loans can be found at:  
<http://www.homeloans.va.gov/sah.htm>
- ★ My HealthVet at <http://www.myhealth.va.gov/>
- ★ VA Caregiver Support, Home Equipment and Modifications at  
[http://www.Caregiver.va.gov/VA\\_Equipment.asp](http://www.Caregiver.va.gov/VA_Equipment.asp)
- ★ VA Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service (PSAS) at: <http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/>
- ★ Home Improvement and Structural Alterations Grant at:  
<http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/hisa2.asp>
- ★ Disabled American Veterans, Transportation Services at:  
<http://www.dav.org/volunteers/Ride.aspx>. The DAV operates a nationwide Transportation Network to meet the need for transportation to and from VA medical facilities for needed treatment.

