Strengthened by innovative tools, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recently issued a record number of decisions for Veterans appealing their disability benefits claims.

As of July 11, VA’s Board of Veterans’ Appeals has issued more than 64,025 decisions for fiscal year 2018, due in part to innovations such as a new interactive decision template and a specialty case team.

“Decisions made by the Board affect Veterans’ lives and it’s up to VA to keep improving this process,” said VA Acting Secretary Peter O’Rourke.

VA Board of Veterans’ Appeals decisions are based on evidence, including the Veteran’s medical records, and consideration of applicable laws and regulations.

For more information about the Veterans appeals process, visit http://www.bva.va.gov.

Summer’s here, and so are picnics! But before you pack your basket and fire up the grill, keep these tips in mind...

It’s getting hot outside! People need eight to 12 glasses of water daily to prevent dehydration, so pack plenty of water.

Keep hot foods hot — above 140 degrees F — and cold foods cold — below 41 degrees F — to prevent the growth of harmful organisms that could make you sick.

Don’t leave foods in the sun! When it’s hot, food shouldn’t be out of the cooler over an hour. And keep coolers in the shade.

If you have a medical condition and would like nutrition education and counseling by a registered dietitian, call 401-273-7100 ext. 1444 for the Outpatient Nutrition Clinic.
A noninvasive method being studied for treating depression and posttraumatic stress may offer benefits for people suffering from chronic low back pain, as well.

Transcranial direct-current stimulation, known as tDCS, works by sending a low current through electrodes, increasing or decreasing neuron activity in the area being stimulated. In this study, the technique appeared to improve pain-related disability and mood symptoms.

"This was a small study, so the results need to be replicated in larger, longer-duration studies, but there is encouraging potential here," said lead study author Dr. Timothy Mariano, a researcher with Harvard Medical School, in Boston, Mass., and the VA Rehabilitation Research and Development Service's Center for Neurorestoration and Neurotechnology, or CfNN, located at the Providence VA Medical Center in Providence, R.I.

Pain has both sensory and emotional effects, explained Dr. Frederick Burgess, former Chief of Anesthesia at the Providence VAMC, who played a major role in getting the study up and running there. Treatments for chronic pain usually focus on the sensation of pain, so there is often an over-reliance on opioid medications, which have dangerous side effects. "People with chronic pain can develop behaviors that may lead to depression and avoiding certain activities," he said. "These emotional issues are not addressed by current medications, so the focus here was on improving mood and disability symptoms without relying on painkilling medications."

Mariano’s team conducted a double-blind, placebo-controlled, randomized trial including 21 patients with chronic low back pain. Some patients received active tDCS treatment, while others received simulated treatment as a placebo for comparison. Participants rated their pain before and after treatment.

After six weeks, patients in the active-treatment group showed improvement compared with those who received the placebo.

"The actual difference at six weeks was fairly modest," Mariano cautioned, “but even a small improvement in a severely impaired population without the risks of opioid medications is encouraging.”

The study was funded by a Young Investigator Grant from the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia & Depression, CfNN, the National Institute of Mental Health, Butler Hospital, and the Brown Institute for Brain Science.