



Hackensack Meridian *Healthier You*



The Reset Issue

Reset Your Health Habits

15 proven, practical ways to feel your best in 2026 — and beyond

Get Better Every Day

Insomnia relief, ingredient swaps, healthy hair and more

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Cover Story

27 Reset your health habits

It can be tricky to balance prioritizing your health with managing every other obligation. But even small changes can have big impact. So we called in some HMH experts and asked: What are the smartest health habit resets to make today, this month and this year? They shared 15 proven — and doable — ways to feel your best in 2026 and beyond.

ILLUSTRATION BY LISK FENG

PHOTOGRAPH (THIS PAGE AND COVER) BY NATHANIEL WELCH



Bob (center) at the Metropark construction site with Chief of Staff Michael McCauley (left) and Chief Growth Officer Jose Lozano (right).

Welcome

Renewing Our Commitment

+ I'M NOT SURE why New Year's gets all the credit (or blame) as *the* time to reset our health habits. Any day — like today — can be the perfect time to renew, refresh or recharge your commitment to well-being. This issue offers inspiration to reexamine the daily habits and assumptions that impact how you achieve your best health.

At Hackensack Meridian Health, we're particularly inspired this year, as our 10th anniversary approaches, to renew our commitment to excellent patient experiences that put innovation into action. Our focus on the highest-quality care has earned recognition from *U.S. News & World Report 2025-26*: Hackensack University Medical Center is now the first hospital in New Jersey's history to be ranked among the top 20 in the nation. It's also been named the No. 1* hospital in the NY-NJ Metro Area, and the No. 1 hospital in New Jersey. HMH has two children's hospitals that ranked No. 1 in New Jersey, at

Jersey Shore University Medical Center and Hackensack University Medical Center. John Theurer Cancer Center ranked best in the state. JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute was named among the top 35 physical rehabilitation hospitals in the U.S. Those accolades are earned daily by every HMH team member who puts our patients first. I'm continually in awe of the care they deliver.

Now, our goal is to ensure that more people who need that care can access it. We're rapidly expanding our ambulatory services across the state. In Woodbridge, our new Health & Wellness Center at Metropark will soon provide more than 60,000 square feet of convenient health care services just steps from Metropark, one of the state's busiest mass transit hubs.

Here's to resets that bring better health for everyone — in 2026 and beyond. **+**

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Better Every Day

“Making one change and sticking with it is better than trying to drastically change things you won't be able to keep up. Tackle each lifestyle improvement one step at a time.”

— James Hong Liu, M.D.



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Reset Your Diet: Simple Ingredient Swaps to Try Today

+ **OVERHAULING HOW YOU EAT** can feel like a tall order. It's true that the standard American diet often involves too much saturated fat, added sodium and added sugar, and not enough fiber. But a few simple ingredient swaps can improve your nutrition — and your health. Start with these five substitutions. Small changes like these add up over time to create lasting healthy habits.

Replace Butter With Avocado Oil

WHY: You may think butter makes everything better, but avocado oil is a seamless substitute, and its neutral flavor profile isn't overpowering in recipes. It's a great swap to reduce saturated fats.

TRY: Use it in sauces or when sautéing or pan-frying.

Replace Cream Cheese With Greek Yogurt

WHY: Cream cheese is loaded with saturated fat, which increases your LDL or "bad" cholesterol level. Greek yogurt — especially reduced-fat or nonfat — is a better source of protein and of calcium, important for bone and muscle health.

TRY: Sub Greek yogurt for cream cheese or mayo

in recipes for dips and spreads.

Replace Baked-Good Desserts With Fruits

WHY: Up to 90% of Americans aren't getting the daily recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. So ditching traditional desserts like cake for fruits can boost your daily intake and reduce sugar (and the weight gain, heart disease and diabetes that sugar can contribute to).

TRY: Baking or roasting fruits enhances sweetness, so you don't need lots of added sugars. Try baked pears or apples topped with cinnamon and agave.



Find more nutrition tips and tasty recipes at [Healthier You](#) online.

Replace Refined Grains With Whole Grains

WHY: Whole grains are a better source of fiber, and a high-fiber diet can improve everything from your weight to your cholesterol. They also give you more vitamins and minerals.

TRY: In rice or pasta dishes, substitute brown rice for white and whole-wheat pasta for regular. When baking, use whole-wheat flour. Aim to make at least half of the grains you eat each day whole grains.

Replace Salt With Citrus

WHY: Heaping on the salt can have a major impact on heart health. The American Heart Association generally advises limiting to no more than 2,300 mg a day. Use citrus instead to boost salt-like flavor and add vitamins.

TRY: Season your protein with fresh lemon or lime juice (along with whatever fresh or dried herbs you like). Whisk it into homemade salad dressings to skip the sodium of many bottled brands. +

Whole-Grain Yogurt Oat Muffins

When you want something sweet but healthy, try these soft, fluffy mini muffins spiked with antioxidant-rich dark chocolate chips. Rolled oats and whole-wheat flour make this a whole-grain treat. For other healthy swaps, this recipe also suggests using honey vs. processed sugar, flaxseed vs. egg, applesauce vs. oil or butter, and (if you like) almond milk or another dairy alternative. Makes 24.

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 cup plain Greek yogurt | 1 teaspoon baking powder |
| 1/4 cup milk or alternative | 1/2 teaspoon baking soda |
| 1 "flax egg"* | 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon |
| 1 teaspoon vanilla | 1/4 teaspoon salt |
| 1/3 cup honey | 1/2 cup mini dark chocolate chips |
| 1 cup old-fashioned rolled oats | 1/4 cup unsweetened applesauce |
| 3/4 cup whole-wheat flour | |

*To make flax egg, mix 1 tablespoon ground flaxseed and 3 tablespoons room-temperature water. Stir with a fork. Let rest for around 15 minutes before using.

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees (or to 350 if your tin is dark-coated or your oven bakes hot). Grease mini-muffin tin with nonstick cooking spray.
2. In a medium bowl or liquid measuring cup, whisk together the yogurt, milk, flax egg, vanilla and honey.
3. In a large bowl, whisk together the oats, flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt. Add chocolate chips and toss to combine.
4. Add the yogurt mixture and the applesauce to the dry ingredients and stir until just combined. (Don't overmix.)
5. Portion batter evenly among the muffin cups. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes or until the tops spring back lightly to the touch and a toothpick comes out clean (or with a couple of moist crumbs).
6. Let the muffins cool for a few minutes in the tin and then remove them to a cooling rack.

Adapted from [melskitchencafe.com](#).





Settle Your Sleep: Break the Insomnia-Anxiety Cycle

+ **YOU'RE TOSSING AND TURNING** in bed, your mind racing, and you keep checking the clock to calculate your dwindling sleep hours. Sound familiar?

When anxious thoughts take over at night, it can be hard to shut them off. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the U.S., affecting more than 40 million adults; difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep can be a symptom. And even people who don't typically deal with a lot of anxiety may experience it at the worst possible moment: bedtime.

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How Insomnia and Anxiety Connect

If you can't sleep, your mind may stick on things you're worried about. Or you may just worry that you aren't asleep and will be tired the next day. This stress can keep you awake and can worsen anxiety for those who experience it, making it even harder to fall asleep or stay asleep. It's a vicious cycle.

People who frequently have trouble sleeping may have what's called sleep initiation insomnia, or difficulty falling asleep. Alternatively, if you wake up in the middle of the night or too early in the morning, you could have sleep maintenance insomnia, or problems staying asleep. And then there's sleep misperception insomnia, when someone believes they aren't sleeping, even if a sleep study would confirm they are.

No matter which type of insomnia you have, add in anxiety or stress and your sleep difficulties may intensify. And vice versa — more time awake in bed means more time to focus on anxious thoughts. Then, even if your anxiety gets better, you might still have trouble sleeping if you've developed unhelpful thought patterns or behaviors around sleep.

How to Break the Cycle

To combat the cycle of insomnia and anxiety:

LIMIT TIME IN BED. Your goal is sleep efficiency, so if you aren't asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing somewhere else. Try reading a book or magazine rather than scrolling on your phone.

DON'T WATCH THE CLOCK. Constantly checking the time may make anxiety and insomnia worse. Turn your clock away so you can't see the time when you're in bed.

AVOID DAYTIME NAPS. If you need a nap, limit it to 20 to 30 minutes. Too much daytime sleep can make it harder to sleep at night.

EXERCISE REGULARLY. Being physically active may help ease insomnia and anxiety. But avoid vigorous exercise in the three hours before bedtime.

KEEP A CONSISTENT SLEEP SCHEDULE.

Go to bed and wake up at roughly the same times every day. Staying up late or sleeping in on week-ends makes it harder to fall asleep on weekdays.

TALK TO A DOCTOR.

If you don't see improvement after trying the tips above, check in with your primary care physician. They may recommend that you see a sleep specialist for further evaluation. Insomnia can be a symptom of sleep apnea, narcolepsy or other underlying conditions.

If other causes are ruled out, the gold standard of treatment is cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I). A provider who specializes in CBT-I can help you change your thoughts and habits about sleep. It's an investment in your health that can improve how you feel every day — and night. **+**



Connect with a primary care provider to step up your sleep.

Heartburn vs. GERD: What's the Difference?

+ **GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX** disease (GERD) affects 18% to 27% of adults in the U.S. — and can result in surprisingly diverse symptoms. The most well-known of those is heartburn, a sensation dreaded by the nearly 60 million Americans who experience it at least once a month.

How heartburn feels can be unique to each person, says Elizabeth John, M.D., a gastroenterologist at Mountainside Medical Group. Dr. John says she's had patients describe it as a burning sensation in the chest, commonly when lying down, or as pain right under the sternum (breastbone). Others talk about regurgitation, nausea, or a sour or bitter taste.

But "GERD is a very complex diagnosis," Dr. John says. "Besides heartburn, it can also show up in unusual ways, including chronic cough, hoarseness, tooth erosions [i.e., areas of thinning enamel] or feeling like something is stuck in the throat."

Heartburn is caused by the reflux of stomach acid up into the esophagus, the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach. And yes, sometimes recurring heartburn is a sign that a person has GERD.

Could you have GERD, and is it a problem? Take note of how severe and frequent your symptoms are. "If you have heartburn once in six months, it's probably not a big deal," Dr. John says. "But if you have it once a week, it can have serious implications down the line." Either way, the discomfort isn't something you just have to live with.



Triggers and Risk Factors

Many people know what triggers their bouts of heartburn, including eating fatty or spicy foods, citrus fruits, tomato products, or dark chocolate. Drinking caffeine or alcohol can cause a flare-up, as can eating large meals or late at night. Some medications can also trigger heartburn.

Risk factors that make a person more prone to heartburn and GERD include being pregnant, over age 50 or a smoker. Your risk also increases if you are overweight or dealing with obesity, have a hiatal hernia (which can only be diagnosed with an upper endoscopy), or have certain connective tissue disorders.

Alarm Signs for Those With GERD

The repeated exposure to stomach acid that comes with GERD can be dangerous for the esophagus over the long term, Dr. John notes. Complications can include narrowing of the esophagus, precancerous changes (Barrett's esophagus) or cancer.

People living with GERD should watch for certain alarm signs. These include trouble or pain when swallowing, which might signal a blockage or severe inflammation. Also look out for unexplained weight loss, tar-like stools or vomit that looks like coffee grounds. And watch for symptoms of anemia (e.g., fatigue, weakness, dizziness), which can be triggered by blood loss inside the esophagus.

If you see any of those signs, or if over-the-counter medications such as proton pump inhibitors or H2 blockers aren't improving your symptoms, Dr. John says, your next step is clear: "It's time to see a doctor." +



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Quick Heart Screenings That Could Help Keep You Healthy

+ **EVER WONDER** how healthy your heart is? It's a good question to ask. Since 1921, heart disease has been the No. 1 cause of death in the U.S. And today, nearly half of American adults have some type of cardiovascular disease. Fortunately, several easy, innovative screenings are now available to help identify your risk and find and treat any problems earlier.

It's important for people with known risk factors for heart disease — including high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, elevated cholesterol, inactivity, smoking or family history — to have regular conversations with their doctor about tests and protective measures. But even if you don't have known risk factors, a heart health screening can be a valuable tool. Screenings can identify hardening of the arteries, abnormal heart rhythms and other early signs of trouble so doctors can help you prevent them from progressing to heart attack or stroke. Common (and quick) options include:

Electrocardiogram (EKG)
Usually lasting only around a minute (plus 5 to 10 minutes of prep), this test shows how fast or slow your heart is beating and monitors its electrical activity. Sticky patches are used to painlessly attach electrodes to your chest, arms and legs, and then you just lie still while the data is collected. An EKG must be ordered by a physician as part of a routine checkup (though insurance might not cover this), and can be used in a doctor's office, urgent care or ER to evaluate palpitations or other symptoms.

CT Calcium Scoring
Individuals with a prescription can self-schedule this painless, noninvasive scan, so talk with your doctor to see if it's right for you. It takes about 10 minutes and uses only a minimal amount of radiation. Your chest will be connected to an EKG monitor, and you'll lie on a table that slides into a doughnut-shaped CT scanner. The screening detects calcified plaque (hardening of the arteries)

and gives a numerical score. The more plaque there is, the higher the score, so results are easy to understand and to track over time. They give your doctor a helpful view of your risk for heart attack or stroke.

AngioScreen®
Bundling several tests into a single visit, with no prescription necessary, an AngioScreen usually takes less than 15 minutes. During the carotid ultrasound, a technician moves a handheld device along the sides of your neck to check for artery blockages that could increase your risk for heart attack or stroke. The ankle brachial index uses a device similar to a blood pressure cuff to check for blockages in leg arteries. The modified EKG tracks your heart rhythm. The screening also checks pulse, blood pressure and body mass index. A nurse reviews your results with you and provides a report you can share with your doctor.

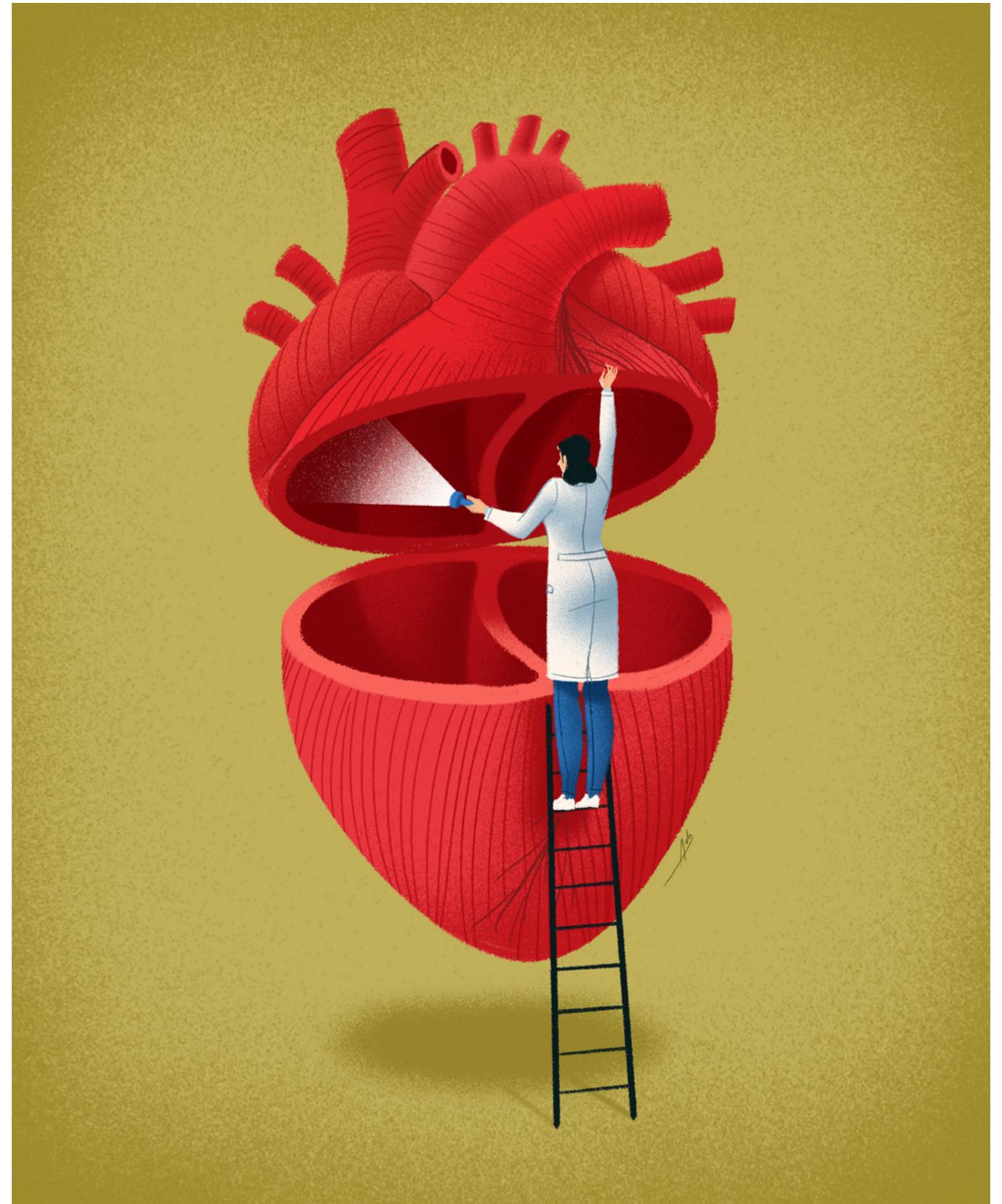
Next Steps
Even if you're not considered to be at high risk for heart disease, talk with your doctor about any appropriate cardiovascular screenings. The results could reset your understanding of your heart health and how to improve or maintain it for many beats to come. **+**



Find HMH heart screening options near you.

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Listen Up to Renew Your Relationship

ASK A HAPPILY married couple what makes their relationship work, and chances are they'll say "communication." If a couple loses the ability to share, interpret and respond to each other's thoughts, their relationship is likely to suffer.

Yet especially for older adults, the missed connections often aren't intentional. Instead, one or both partners may have difficulty hearing. Think about it: Have there been times when your partner's voice didn't sound loud enough, or clear enough, to understand?

The problem is more common than you might think. About 10% of adults ages 55 to 64 have hearing loss that's considered disabling. That number rises to 22% for ages 65 to 74 and to 55% for those 75-plus.

Research confirms that unmanaged hearing loss can cause relationships to fail. In a survey of 1,500 hearing-impaired people over age 55, 44% said that relationships with their partner, friends or family had suffered because they couldn't hear properly. Even more alarming, 34% said they had lost touch with friends, or in some cases seen their marriage fall apart, due to the breakdown in communication.

Hearing loss has been tied to increased risk of dementia, anxiety and depression. Any of these conditions can strain relationships even further.

What Causes Hearing Loss?

Hearing loss can be broken down into three main types:

SENSORINEURAL: The most common type is caused by inner ear damage. Contributing factors can include aging, noise exposure, heredity, illness, medications or head trauma.

CONDUCTIVE: This loss happens when sounds can't get through the outer and middle ear. The problem,



Take our Hearing Loss Risk Quiz or connect with an HMH audiologist.



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which is often reversible with treatment, could be fluid or wax buildup, a hole in the eardrum, an ear infection, or misalignment of bones in the middle ear.

MIXED: Sensorineural and conductive hearing loss can occur at the same time. For example, someone who works around loud noises may also have fluid buildup from an ear infection.

Testing and Treatment

If you've had trouble communicating with your spouse (or others) and wonder if hearing loss could be responsible, a self-assessment can be an easy place to start. Check out the simple Hearing Loss Risk Quiz on our audiology website.

For a professional opinion — or a clear next step if any alerts are raised by your self-assessment — visit an HMH audiologist. If you're diagnosed with hearing loss, your provider will work with you on a treatment plan. Options may include an assistive listening device, a personal amplifier that can help you with one-on-one conversation by separating speech from background noise.

Another option, one that many people are familiar with, is hearing aids. Less well-known are the huge improvements in technology, comfort and convenience that hearing aids have adopted in

recent years. Custom-fitted prescription aids come in a range of styles and sizes to suit different individual needs. Some models are nearly invisible inside the ear canal.

For those not helped by hearing aids, a cochlear implant may be the right choice. It requires surgery, as well as time and commitment to retrain the brain to interpret sounds after the device is implanted and activated. But as long as you're in generally good health, there's no upper age limit for the procedure. The fastest-growing group of implant recipients is patients over 80.

Whatever's behind your hearing loss, your audiologist will help you review treatment options and costs, including insurance coverage. Ultimately, better hearing isn't just valuable for you — it may be the best gift you'll ever give your loved one. +

Check Your Balance: How Are Your Hormones?

FEELING UNUSUALLY tired, moody or foggy?

For many women, these frustrating symptoms are tied to hormone imbalances.

Hormones act as chemical messengers that control everything from metabolism and sleep to mood and libido, so even small disruptions can throw off your whole system. When hormones aren't being produced or regulated properly, your body will send signals.

Signs to Watch For

The most common signs of imbalance are fatigue that won't let up, unexplained weight gain, mood swings, sleep problems and irregular periods. You might also notice brain fog and poor concentration; hair loss or new, unwanted hair growth; hot flashes or night sweats; low libido or painful sexual activity; or skin issues such as acne or dry skin.

For women of reproductive age, which the World Health Organization defines as typically 15 to 49, your

menstrual cycle can be one of the clearest windows into your hormonal health. Red flags include very short (under 21 days) or very long (over 35 days) cycles, or unpredictable or missed periods. Debilitating cramps; extreme monthly mood swings; or heavy, prolonged bleeding are other signs to look for.

By the time women reach age 35 to 45, these symptoms could signal perimenopause, the transition phase before menopause. Declining progesterone is often the first change, bringing anxiety, sleep issues and irregular cycles, while fluctuating estrogen can trigger hot flashes, mood swings and brain fog.

As women enter their early 50s and approach menopause — the point when there's been no menstrual period for 12 months — symptoms can become more pronounced. For some, hot flashes happen only occasionally, but for others, they can occur multiple times a day and disrupt sleep (aka night sweats). That can lead to or worsen fatigue, brain fog, irritability and weight gain.

What to Do About Them

Sometimes, daily habits can work against your hormone health. Chronic stress, poor diet, and too little sleep or exercise can be culprits — and can be common for women busy with work or caregiving. High alcohol or caffeine intake can also affect hormone balance.

Lifestyle changes can help, but often they're not enough. So if symptoms affect your everyday life and don't go away, or if they're sudden and severe, talk to your doctor.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHERIEBING

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In some cases, the cause might go beyond the hormonal changes that come with aging. Fibroids, polyps, thyroid problems or other conditions could be playing a part. Track your symptoms before your appointment to help your doctor figure out what's behind them.

If no other concerns are found, your doctor can guide you in dealing with your hormonal changes. For example, several different types of medication can help with hot flashes. And for some women, hormone replacement therapy

can bring broad relief. Women still experiencing problematic symptoms postmenopause or over age 60 also have options for treatment — talk with your doctor or gynecologist.

With the right support, you can find your balance and start feeling like yourself again. +



Connect with a gynecologist near you.

Are At-Home Hormone Tests Worth It?

You've probably seen them advertised on social media or stocked on the shelves of your pharmacy: at-home hormone tests promising insight into everything from menopause to fertility to overall hormone health. Are they worth your time and money?

The kits have pluses and minuses:

-  These kits are convenient and may give useful clues that something is off, especially for those with limited access to care.
-  If you have an HSA or FSA, you may be able to use those funds to pay for your kit and testing.
-  Results can be tricky to interpret.
-  Results are often incomplete or inaccurate due to fluctuating hormone levels and difficulties with getting (and keeping) a high-quality sample.
-  The cost, up to a few hundred dollars, typically isn't covered by insurance. So you'll probably need to pay out of pocket.

The takeaway? While at-home kits can be a starting point for some, especially if used to begin a conversation with your doctor, they can't replace professional diagnosis and treatment for hormonal issues.





Find Freedom From Chronic Pain

+ **THERE'S NO GAIN** to perpetual pain. Unrelenting aches can rob you of sleep, healthy eating patterns, and the ability to work or even move freely.

To make matters worse, depression, irritability and loneliness often accompany the pain. "One problem feeds into the other, which makes chronic pain harder to help," says Danielle Groves, M.D., attending physical medicine and rehabilitation physician at Pascack Valley Medical Group in Emerson.

But if you've just been putting up with chronic pain — allowing it to slow down or stop your daily routines — it may be time for a reset. Help is available to get you moving again. "It usually takes a combination of approaches to manage chronic pain," Dr. Groves says. "Doctor and patient must work together."

Dr. Groves points to six treatment approaches for pushing past chronic pain.

Physical Therapy

A physical therapist can help your doctor pinpoint the cause of your discomfort, which isn't always obvious. Then they can teach you how to stretch the affected muscles and strengthen weak ones that may be contributing to your pain. To offer some immediate relief, they may also use heat, ice, ultrasound, electric stimulation and deep-tissue massage.

Regular Exercise

Like physical therapy, working out at home, outdoors or at a gym can soothe soreness. Exercise not only improves mobility and strength but also burns



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calories, which can help you lose weight that strains joints. Dr. Groves suggests walking on a treadmill or outdoors, walking in the shallow end of a pool, doing yoga or Pilates, or (especially for fitness beginners) taking one-on-one exercise classes or working with a personal trainer.

Pills and Patches

Over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), acetaminophen or lidocaine patches can break the cycle of pain. In some cases, supplements with turmeric, glucosamine or chondroitin may help arthritic joint pain; ask your doctor if they're an option for you. Doctors in certain cases may prescribe muscle relaxers or stronger pain medications, to be used under close supervision. Remember to let your doctor know about all over-the-counter and prescribed supplements, pain relievers and other medications you take.

Complementary Care

Chiropractors and acupuncturists offer treatments that can work alongside standard care. Chiropractors manipulate joints and align the spine, which can relieve pain in joints, muscles and connective tissues. Acupuncture uses very thin needles inserted into the skin to stimulate the body's release of natural painkillers.

Mind-Body Resets

Mind-body practices can help long-term pain as well as the anxiety, insomnia and depression that may go along with it. Meditation is a proven approach, with plenty of free apps and videos to help you find a style that works for you. For biofeedback, another helpful technique, you partner with a physical therapist to learn to become more aware of — and get some control over — bodily functions such as heartbeat, breathing and muscle tension.

Medical Treatments

If you've tried these approaches but aren't getting relief, see your doctor or a pain management specialist. They may suggest injections — a corticosteroid shot targeting an inflamed joint, a trigger point injection to calm a muscle in spasm or a gel injection for an osteoarthritic knee. If the pain persists, your doctor can review whether you may benefit from surgery or an advanced procedure to block pain signals, such as radiofrequency ablation or spinal cord stimulation. Whichever path you choose, with patience, commitment and the right care, relief can be within reach. +



Relaxation Techniques to Try Now

Whether you need a time-out from chronic pain or simply from the stresses of everyday life, these three techniques can help.

Deep Breathing

Expand your belly as you inhale. Hold the breath. Then deflate your belly as you breathe out. Aim for four seconds for each step.

Progressive Relaxation

While sitting or lying down, tense and then relax each muscle group — forehead, eyes, jaw, neck, etc. — from head to foot or vice versa.

Guided Imagery

Sit or lie down and imagine being in a peaceful place. Focus on the sights, sounds and other sensations you would experience there.

Restore Your Hair (and Your Confidence)

HAVE YOU caught yourself scrutinizing your hairline in the mirror or worrying that your part is getting wider?

If so, you're not alone. The American Hair Loss Association says that by age 35, two-thirds of American men face noticeable thinning. Nearly 40% of women will notice it by age 50. While often brushed off as normal aging, hair loss can take a real toll on self-confidence.

Hair loss doesn't have just one cause, so treating it starts with figuring out what's behind it. Genetics, a common culprit, can affect men and women.

But other factors may be at play, especially for women: menopause, iron deficiency

anemia, thyroid disease, stress or illness. If underlying conditions are ruled out or treated, your doctor may decide your loss is genetic and suggest treatment.

The marketplace is full of products claiming to help with hair loss, but your doctor can direct you to treatments that get real results, sometimes combining several for the best outcome.

Topical minoxidil is available over the counter. (Tip: The foam version blends in better than the liquid, without making hair greasy.) You'll apply it to thinning areas twice a day. Side effects are minimal. Some users initially notice more shedding, but that's usually



Discuss hair loss treatments with a primary care provider near you.

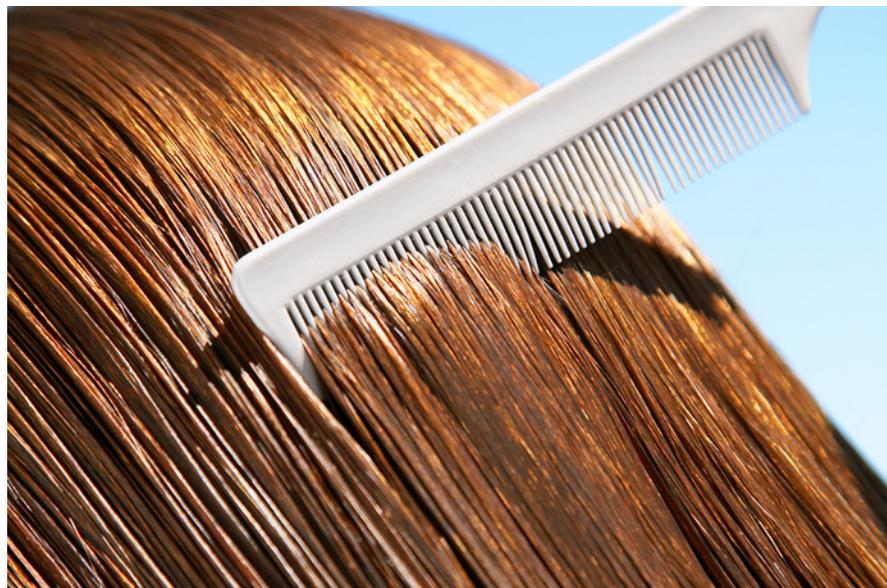
temporary. Treatment is a long-term commitment but can help regrowth.

Oral minoxidil usually works within a month or two to stop hair loss and help new growth. Though use for hair loss is considered off-label (it was developed as a blood pressure medication), studies have shown it to be effective and safe when prescribed and monitored by a physician.

Finasteride is a prescription pill that reduces your levels of dihydrotestosterone — the hormone that causes hair follicles to shrink. It's FDA-approved for men, and it's used off-label for women. It can decrease libido and has been linked to depression in some young men. But for many people, it's effective. Others get better results with dutasteride, a similar medication doctors use off-label (while monitoring patients carefully).

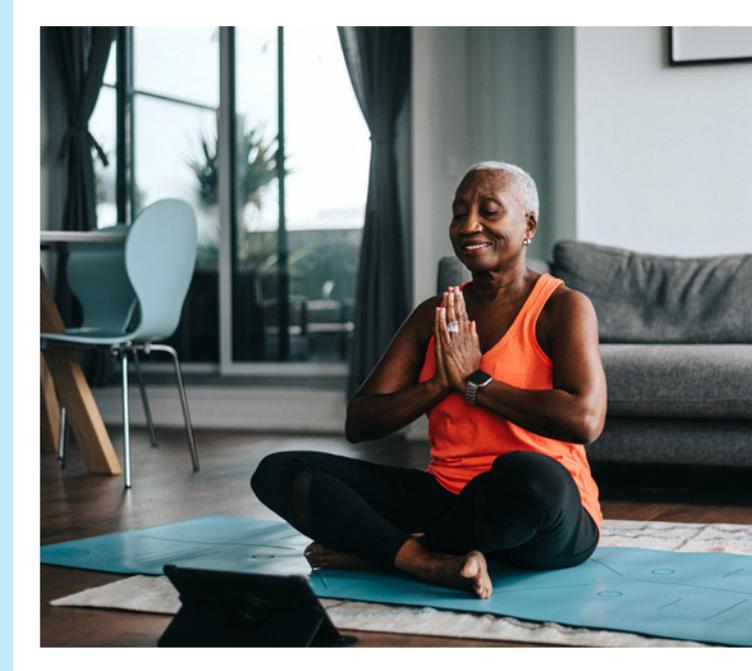
Low-level laser therapy via FDA-approved red-light caps, combs and headbands stimulates hair follicles with lasers or LEDs. The at-home devices must be used consistently and can be pricey, starting at a couple hundred dollars. But they can improve hair quality over time.

Whichever treatment you choose, the sooner you start, the better your chance of preserving the hair you have — and of seeing new growth on a future visit to the mirror. +



Healthier Community

A Special Section Just for You



When (and Where) Healthy Happens

Midday Meditation

Wednesdays at 12 p.m. via livestream

What's one small health reset that can make a big difference in how you feel? Adding meditation to your routine (or doing it more regularly). Take a midday pause with HMH for a few minutes of mindfulness meditation. Consistent practice may help lower blood pressure, improve sleep and boost focus. And who couldn't use a little more calm?

Scan the QR code below for a link to join.

Effective Strategies to Stop Smoking

Make a fresh start for your health with support from our four-session smoking-cessation program. Learn how to quit for good with methods that include coping with urges, managing withdrawal, medication options, and other helpful topics and techniques.

Registration required. Scan the QR code at right to see program locations.

AngioScreen®

Learn your risk for heart attack and stroke. This 15-minute screening includes a carotid artery ultrasound, heart rhythm and blood pressure checks, and screening for abdominal aortic aneurysm and peripheral artery disease. Receive a report of your findings, educational material and an on-the-spot consultation with a registered nurse. See "Quick Heart Screenings That Could Help Keep You Healthy" in this issue for more details.

Special rate: \$49.95. Registration required.

Support Groups

Hackensack Meridian Health offers a wide range of online and in-person support group meetings, from diabetes to stroke to brain injury and others.

Learn more at HMHforU.org/SupportGroups.

Productive Parenting

This free six-week virtual program (available in English and Spanish) provides expert tips and strategies for raising responsible, understanding children and responding to difficult behaviors.

Registration required.



Scan to register for these events and learn about others online or in your area. Or call 800-560-9990.



Office Visit

Active and Proactive: Dr. James Liu

 **GROWING UP** in New Jersey, James Hong Liu, M.D., always knew he wanted to stay connected to his community. And he has, building his entire medical career within the Hackensack Meridian Health network. After graduating from Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine and completing his residency at Palisades Medical Center, Dr. Liu now serves Hoboken as an internal medicine physician with Hackensack Meridian Medical Group.

Dr. Liu's wellness philosophy focuses on sustainable change. "Making one change and sticking with it is better than trying to drastically change things you won't be able to keep up for more than a week," he says.

His emphasis on sticking with healthy habits includes keeping yourself moving outdoors when possible, even in the cooler seasons. "I know it's cold, but it's still beneficial to go outside to get fresh air, a little bit of sunlight," he says. "We need that change of environment to

feel better, mentally and physically." So, he says, bundle up and step out, even briefly.

That's especially important for people with seated indoor jobs. Desk workers, he says, should reframe what "taking a break" means. "If you're sedentary, your break should actually be more active," he says, "like going for a walk." On the flip side, someone who works on their feet all day might need to sit down and rest to decompress.

In all walks of life, stress is a major issue to watch if you want to stay healthy, he says. "We know that stress is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, shorter lifespan, things like that," Dr. Liu says. He recommends taking short breaks throughout the day to offset stress buildup.

He practices what he preaches. He enjoys making time for stationary bike workouts, lifting weights and golf. He's working to get back into swimming and basketball. "It's important to have activities to look forward

to," he emphasizes. "It's a great reset."

Besides participating in physical sports and recreation, Dr. Liu also has some helpful perspective he's gained from other types of games: He was once a professional video-game player, ranked No. 11 in the world in Super Smash Bros. Melee. The approach he brought to gaming translates to his advice for patients — break down complex goals into manageable steps. "Everything can be broken down into something simpler," he says. "Tackle each lifestyle improvement one step at a time."

Dr. Liu says it's never too early — or too late — to start building good habits. "What you do now helps you feel better today," he says, "but it's also a plan for how you want to feel in the future." +



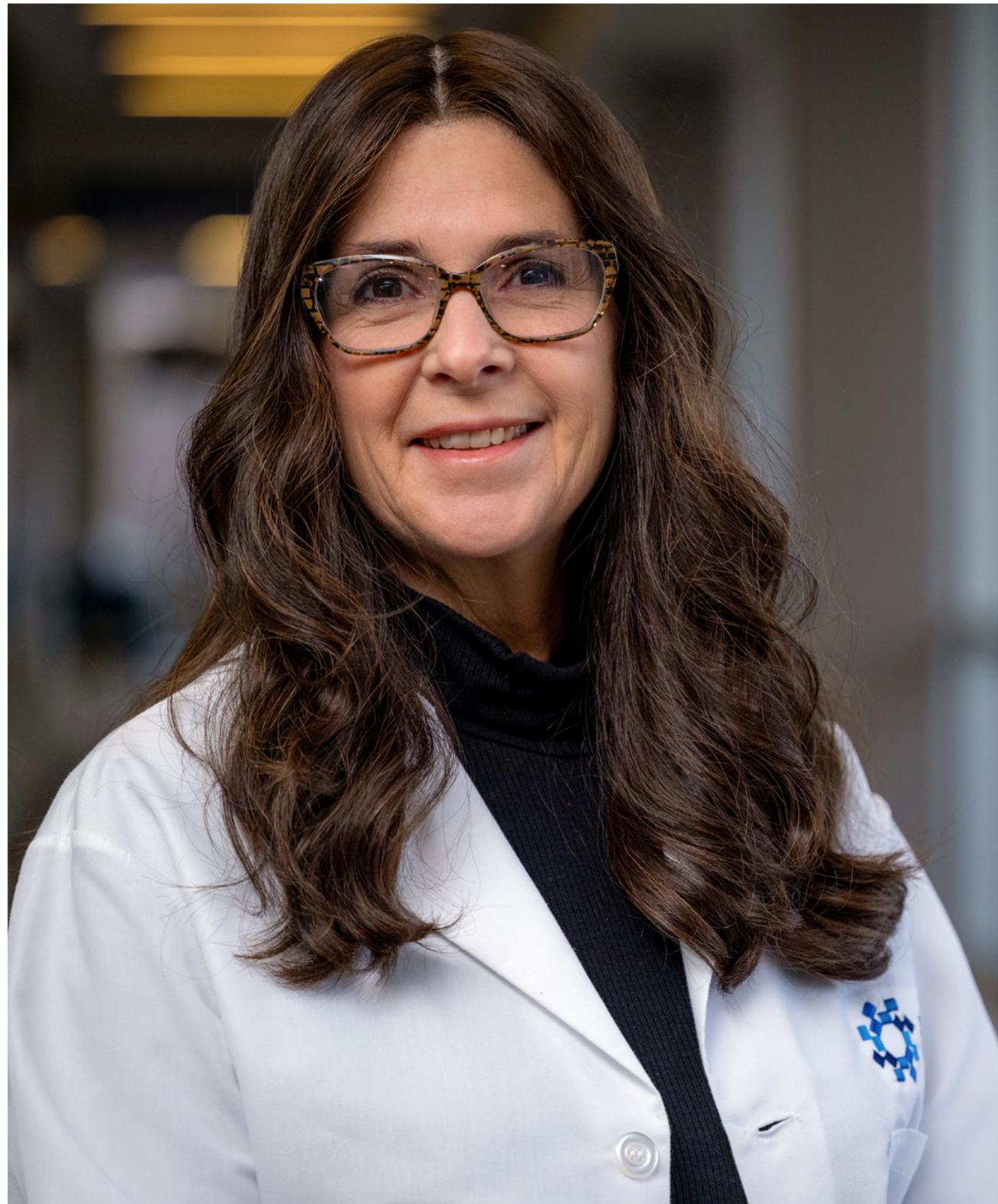
Connect with Dr. Liu in Hoboken or with another primary care provider near you.



"I love it when my patients think proactively. The smartest question they can ask me is 'What are my next steps — when should I see you again, or who should I see next?' It helps when we all take ownership over our health."

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Office Visit

A Foundation of Trust: Dr. Michelle Wilks



GROWING UP in New York as the youngest of four children, Michelle Anne Wilks, M.D., was always on the receiving end of things. Today, her family inspires her to pay it forward in the compassionate care she gives her patients from the greater Edison and Woodbridge communities.

Her desire to pursue a medical career emerged during college, when she volunteered in a hospital unit for patients with HIV and AIDS. “They needed someone to listen and not judge,” she says. “I loved helping them.” She went on to medical school, completed her residency and began working part-time at a private practice in New Jersey. A referral from her boss led to her position in family medicine at JFK University Medical Center. Soon she’ll be moving to HMH’s new Health & Wellness Center at Metropark.

From the start, trust has been the foundation of her practice. “In medical school, you learn to tell patients to do X, Y and Z — but not everybody’s life fits into X, Y and Z,” she

says. “By telling them you understand that their circumstances may not be ideal, by empathizing, you encourage rapport, and that helps with treatment.”

Dr. Wilks recalls one patient who wasn’t exercising. Eventually, the woman explained her situation. “She had a child with a severe disability in an institution, and she sat by their bedside all day. We talked about finding time for self-care.”

Dr. Wilks has shared her approach when supervising residents. She emphasizes reality-checked health advice. Patients may hesitate to admit they aren’t consistent with medications, for instance, so she recently advised a resident to ask, “How many times a week do you miss doses?” instead of “Do you take your medications regularly?” It worked: The patient admitted to skipping doses and discussed solutions with the resident.

Doctors at JFK have a wealth of resources, a key

reason Dr. Wilks has valued working there. The same will be true at the new Health & Wellness Center at Metropark. “Patients will get great support,” she says.

In her free time, Dr. Wilks enjoys creating healthier versions of treats (think squash muffins). She encourages patients to stay as active as possible: “With spring coming, that’s a great opportunity to get on track with health habits since there are more daylight hours to do things like taking walks.” She follows her own advice, getting outdoors regularly for golf, tubing and hydrobiking with her five children.

She’s grateful for her work family, too. “There’s a reason a lot of us have been with Hackensack Meridian Health for so long,” she says. “Everyone has the patients’ best interests in mind. The nurses, the medical assistants — they’re fantastic. By the time I ask for something, they’ve already taken care of it.”



Connect with Dr. Wilks in Edison or Woodbridge, or with another primary care provider near you.



“Spring is on the way. That’s a good time to get to the market, explore the produce that’s newly in season and work it into recipes. Or plan now to try gardening — see your fruits and vegetables grow and then enjoy them.”

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Office Visit

A Passion for Prevention: Dr. Chandani Patel

 **IN COLLEGE**, Chandani Patel, M.D., volunteered on a health care mission in rural Nicaragua. Watching children wait all day for appointments at a pediatric clinic forever changed her perspective.

“The kids who couldn’t get in to see the doctor had to come back the next day — with the hope that the doctor would still be there,” says Dr. Patel, who grew up in Manchester, New Jersey. “Being able to make even a small difference is something I’ll never forget.” And something that inspired her future path: She now works as a family medicine physician with Hackensack Meridian Medical Group in Waretown.

After graduating from The College of New Jersey, Dr. Patel attended medical school at Spartan Health Sciences University in St. Lucia. For residency, she was determined to return to her New Jersey roots and, happily, ended up at Ocean University Medical Center in Brick.

She now treats a wide range of patients with chronic conditions such as hypertension, high

cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes and hypothyroidism.

“Patients may come in for an acute concern, but we’re also discussing preventive care,” she says. “I’m a big advocate for prevention.”

Educating patients on the importance of screening tests is a top priority. “I’m always telling them, ‘You’re 40, so you should have a mammogram,’ or ‘You’re 45, so you should have a colonoscopy.’ I try to explain each test and why it’s important,” she says. “I tell patients that unfortunately there aren’t screenings for every disease, but for the ones we can screen for, let’s do it.”

Ultimately, Dr. Patel says her goal is to be as approachable with her patients as possible. “That’s so important, developing a strong rapport,” she says. “I always want to make sure patients are comfortable opening up to me.”

When she’s not working, Dr. Patel loves to travel. “Ever since we started

dating, my husband and I have tried to go to at least one country each year,” she says. They’ve visited the Maldives, the UAE, Turkey and Greece. “Japan is on our list,” she notes. “We’d love to see Mount Fuji and the cherry blossoms.”

Dr. Patel reminds her patients that, whether they’re at home or away, staying active doesn’t mean they have to hit the gym. “Just going for a swim, a walk or a light jog is a great way to start your day off strong.”

She keeps active herself thanks to another passion: She’s a classically trained Bharatanatyam dancer. “I had to stop doing it as intensively when I went to college, but I love to dance,” she says. “I still choreograph all the dances for family weddings!”



Connect with Dr. Patel in Waretown or with another primary care provider near you.



“Eating healthy enhances your mood and energy. Start the day with a protein-rich breakfast like eggs, avocado toast or cottage cheese. Then reach for snacks like nuts, fruits, chia seed pudding or yogurt.”

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Care Journey

Living Better After Cancer: Nora Ambros and Dr. Richard Winters

FOR THOUSANDS OF cancer survivors, beating the disease is only the beginning of a new, lifelong challenge: lymphedema. After treatments such as lymph node removal or radiation, people like Nora Ambros can be left with a constant reminder — painful, persistent swelling in an arm or leg. Lymphedema, caused by a blockage in the body’s lymphatic system, affects as many as 1 in 5 breast cancer survivors. It’s more than a cosmetic issue. It can limit mobility and cause discomfort, and it often requires wearing tight compression sleeves. Until recently, reliable treatment options were limited. At Hackensack University Medical Center, that’s changing.

A Turning Point

For nearly 30 years, Nora lived with a painful reminder of her first experience with breast cancer. Diagnosed with Stage 3 cancer in her left breast in 1996, she underwent a mastectomy and became one of the first patients to have reconstructive surgery at Hackensack. While the treatment saved her life, it left her with severe lymphedema in her left arm.

The swelling affected everything. Clothes didn’t fit, simple tasks became difficult, and she was at risk for painful infections. “You survive cancer, and you’re so grateful,” she says, “but you’re left with this daily struggle.”

In 2025, Nora’s life took another turn. A routine screening revealed breast cancer in her right breast. Thankfully, it was caught early. As Nora prepared for another mastectomy and reconstruction, she learned about something that could finally free her from decades of pain and swelling.

An Innovative Approach

Hackensack is the first hospital in New Jersey to acquire and use the Symani® Surgical System. This robotic microsurgery platform is revolutionizing reconstructive care.

An Investment in Survivors

For years, New Jersey patients who needed advanced reconstructive or microsurgery often had to travel out of state for care. That’s no longer necessary with world-class robotic precision now available at Hackensack University Medical Center — ranked the No. 1 hospital in New Jersey and a top 20 hospital nationally by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Hackensack’s leadership invested in the Symani Surgical System with a clear understanding of its impact on cancer survivors like Nora. “Our commitment to our patients extends far beyond their initial treatment,” says Dr. Winters. “It’s about helping them live full, healthy lives.”

For residents of the tri-state area dealing with lymphedema and other complex conditions, the future is brighter — and closer — than ever.

Treating lymphedema surgically requires connecting lymphatic vessels — often thinner than a strand of hair — to nearby veins, creating a new pathway for trapped fluid to drain. It’s one of the most delicate procedures imaginable. Even the steadiest surgical hands can tremble working at such a scale.

With the Symani system, the surgeon, seated at a console, controls robotic arms that filter out any tremor and scale down every movement. The result is unprecedented precision and stability.

“Lymphedema surgery is the ultimate test of a microsurgeon’s skill,” says Richard M. Winters, M.D., chair of Plastic Surgery at Hackensack. “We’re working on structures barely visible to the naked eye. The Symani system allows us to perform complex repairs with a higher degree of success. We can offer patients a real chance to reduce their swelling.”



Learn more about robotic microsurgery for lymphedema.

A Pioneer Patient (Again)

While undergoing treatment for her right breast, Nora learned she was an ideal candidate for the new procedure to address her lymphedema. She was the first patient to have robotic lymphovenous bypass surgery at Hackensack, performed by surgeon Y-Vu Robert Van, M.D.

The procedure required just a few incisions, each less than 2 inches long. “The next day, I was back to work,” Nora says.

Now, she has less pain and more confidence. “My arm is significantly smaller. For the first time in decades, I’m wearing short sleeves and don’t feel like I have to hide. To think that I might not have to worry about getting an infection every time I work in the garden — it’s a freedom I thought I’d never have again.”



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Dr. Trachtenberg (left) and Dr. Greiss (right) worked together on treatment.

Care Journey

Treating Concussion Completely: Dr. Lauren Trachtenberg and Dr. Christine Greiss

FATIGUE. HEADACHES. Sensitivity to light. Issues with balance and vision. These symptoms are common with a concussion, a brain injury caused by a blow to the head.

Most people recover within two to three weeks. But for Lauren Trachtenberg, M.D., the symptoms didn't go away. Even as time passed after her concussion from a car accident, the problems persisted, hindering her ability to work her long shifts as a resident physician at JFK University Medical Center.

"I knew I needed a new path," Dr. Trachtenberg says. So she turned to the Concussion Program at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute.

New Approaches

A full evaluation by Christine Greiss, D.O., medical director of the Center for Brain Injuries at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute, uncovered the extent of Dr. Trachtenberg's post-concussion syndrome. Dr. Greiss prescribed medications and comprehensive rehabilitation that included vestibular (balance and coordination) and cognitive and physical therapies.

The treatment was transformative. "My symptoms have mostly resolved," Dr. Trachtenberg says. "We did 'brain training' for vision and balance. Physical therapy helped my neck pain, which was contributing to migraines. I worked on a light board to improve visual awareness."

It's a relief felt by many patients, thanks to new approaches used at the institute. In the past, symptoms like poor concentration, depression, anxiety and fatigue may (or may not) have been vaguely attributed to post-concussion syndrome. Today, brain injury specialists can pinpoint the source of — and treatment for — symptoms more precisely.

They can examine speech patterns, memory and attention, as well as reflexes and general

health. They can conduct a Vestibular Ocular Motor Screening to evaluate the systems involved with integrating balance, vision and movement. They can test hormone levels, as research has recognized that brain injury can affect the pituitary gland and hormones.

"It's not enough to just look for structural damage in the brain," Dr. Greiss says. "Concussion can cause chemical changes."

Comprehensive Care

People diagnosed with a concussion are no longer advised to rest at home with the lights off, but to get out, walk and gradually incorporate activity back into their lives. For those whose symptoms persist, rehabilitation medicine specialists also work toward big-picture goals: How is the patient doing in daily life? Are they having trouble driving? Going back to work? Do they need help at home?

Dr. Greiss compares it to car trouble, which can come

Concussion Facts

A type of traumatic brain injury, a concussion happens when the brain moves inside the skull after a blow or shake to the head or body. Nearly 4 million concussions occur each year in the U.S. from sports- and recreation-related injuries alone. Other common causes include car accidents, falls, military combat and assaults. Seek medical care after any significant head injury — and don't take NSAIDs like ibuprofen until you do, since they can increase the risk of bleeding in the brain.

If you (or a loved one) have concussion symptoms that persist or get worse after a few weeks, consider seeing a specialist. The JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute Concussion Program treats any concussions, especially those resistant to standard care.



Learn more about concussion rehabilitation.

from many sources and have broad effects. "It's like looking at the engine and saying, 'Nothing's wrong' — that's not enough," she says. "You must see how the car drives out on the road, so we explore how patients function in their lives."

Specialists say patients tell them that friends, family and even other doctors can miss the extent of their symptoms and the benefits of treatment. "That's unfortunate," Dr. Greiss says. "Treatment of concussion has advanced swiftly." Part of a physician committee created by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, Dr. Greiss advises programs nationwide on breakthroughs.

Her advice for those experiencing symptoms? "Seek out the most up-to-date concussion care," she urges. Dr. Trachtenberg is glad she did. +



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Care Journey

Advanced Care for Early-Stage Cancer: Martha Groh and Dr. Rachel NeMoyer

AFTER WATCHING her sister go through a tough cancer battle, Manahawkin resident Martha Groh decided to get her own health checked. The 70-year-old retired teacher and grandmother of two was thinking back to some scans she'd had several years earlier.

At that time, a CT scan had shown some spots on her right lung. A series of follow-up scans also showed the nodules, which looked like frosted glass, but since they weren't changing, no further action was taken.

Still, a few years on, Martha wanted more peace of mind. "My sister's situation put it in my head that maybe I should get checked again," she says.

Martha's intuition paid off. Another CT scan in 2024 changed everything, showing tiny, almost invisible changes in the nodules.

A New Light

After Southern Ocean Medical Center pulmonologist Jeffrey Lipper, M.D., confirmed that Martha's nodules looked suspicious, he referred her to Rachel E. NeMoyer, M.D., a thoracic surgeon at Jersey Shore University Medical Center, Ocean University Medical Center and Southern Ocean Medical Center.

Dr. NeMoyer decided Martha was an ideal candidate for a groundbreaking new technology called Cytalux®, a fluorescent dye that's given by IV before surgery and then binds to cancer cells to "light them up." During surgery, a special camera detects the dye and emits a bright green signal, allowing surgeons to easily identify cancerous tissue.

Cytalux was approved by the FDA in 2022 for use in lung and ovarian cancer patients, but it's not yet widely available. Jersey

Robotic Surgery Brings Big Benefits

In the past, surgery for lung cancer meant removing an entire lung or lobe. But today, 90% of lung cancer surgeries at HMH are performed with robotic technology, which provides greater precision and flexibility even in the hardest-to-reach areas.

Compared to traditional open surgery, this minimally invasive thoracic surgery usually results in less pain, scarring and blood loss for patients. It also has a lower risk of infection. Patients tend to have a shorter hospital stay and a faster recovery — and often, a better outcome.

Shore quickly adopted the technology, and it's now also in use at Southern Ocean and Ocean. Martha was one of HMH's first 10 patients to benefit from Cytalux.

"Martha came to us at the perfect time," Dr. NeMoyer says. "In the past, we didn't have the technology to remove her type of cancer at such a small size. We would have had to take out an entire lobe of her lung."

In August 2024, Martha had the nodules completely removed with minimally invasive robotic surgery. Dr. NeMoyer made five small incisions in Martha's right ribcage area to insert surgical instruments, including the camera and light that illuminated the nodules. The procedure was finished within an hour and a half.

Martha's lung cancer turned out to be a rare, aggressive type. "It's good we went after this early, so it didn't spread," Dr. NeMoyer says. "Martha wouldn't have had any symptoms until the cancer was far along."



Take our free lung health assessment.



RACHEL E. NEMOYER, M.D.

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Continued (and Convenient) Care

Two days after surgery, Martha went home. An avid swimmer and gardener, she quickly resumed her normal activities. At the end of 2024, she had four rounds of preventive chemotherapy at Southern Ocean.

"All of my chemotherapy was just 10 minutes away from my house," Martha says. "That made everything much easier."

Dr. NeMoyer, who saw Martha for follow-ups, expects her to have continued good health. Martha is now looking forward to a cruise to Spain and Portugal, and she's excited to spend more time with her grandchildren.

Martha urges others not to ignore that little voice inside them telling them to check on a medical issue. "If I hadn't done anything," she says, "what would have happened?" +

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Sharing the Health

A Pathway for Future Physicians

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE dream of one day becoming a doctor. But not all of them have the opportunity — or the ongoing support — to make that dream a reality.

That's why an internship program at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine is not only giving high school students firsthand exposure to the field of medicine — it's also helping them meet academic, logistical and other challenges that stand between them and their career goals.

The M.I.N.D.S. (Medical Internship Navigating and Discovering Science) program began in 2018 as a six-week internship. Now, it

provides mentorship and guidance through students' high school years and into college. Along the way, participants receive SAT prep as well as CPR and Narcan® certification. They shadow physicians, perform mock interviews, and take part in community health projects and medical simulations.

With a looming physician shortage nationwide, initiatives like M.I.N.D.S. are essential. The program welcomes everyone interested in pursuing a career in medicine, including promising high school candidates who often experience gaps in access and opportunity. In 2025, the program expanded to include kids of HMH team members.

M.I.N.D.S. offers sustained support not just for students

but also for their families. By engaging parents, the program empowers them to help their child succeed. And success is already becoming a reality for program alumni. Some have gone on to universities including Yale, Harvard and Columbia, and several are now entering medical and health professional schools.

To ensure the program can accomplish its mission to nurture the next generation of medical leaders, funding is key. "Philanthropic support is vital to the continued growth of the M.I.N.D.S. program," says Sheila Wolfinger, executive director of development for the School of Medicine. "Donations ensure these students get a deep understanding of modern medicine — and that they're prepared to serve all communities with excellence and compassion."

Sheila and other leaders at the School of Medicine see M.I.N.D.S. as a commitment to future physicians and to providing exceptional care for people in New Jersey and beyond. Helping doctors-to-be grow skills, confidence and sense of purpose ensures they'll be able to meet the demands of health care today — and tomorrow. **+**

Applications are open to rising high school juniors and seniors in New Jersey.



Support young doctors-to-be. Donate to the M.I.N.D.S. program.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHANIEL WELCH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER GAMLEN



Expert-Backed

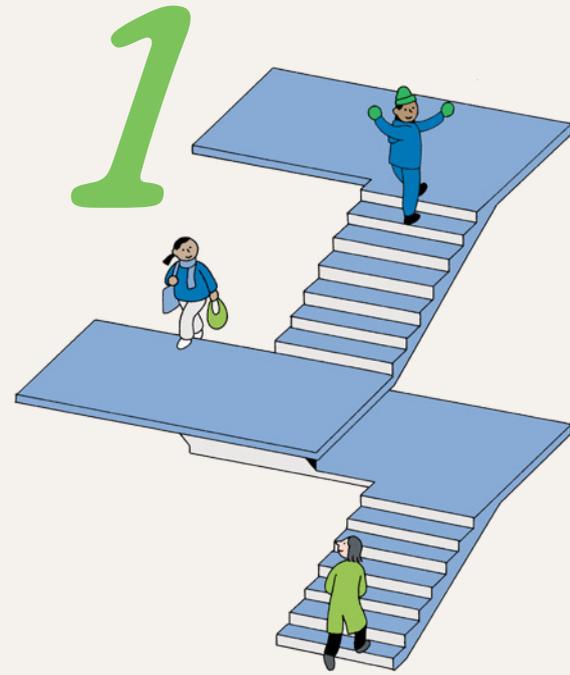
Ways to

Feel Better



Lose weight. Eat right. Exercise more. How are those New Year's resolutions going? Way too often, our good intentions don't make it to February, and not because we don't care or don't have willpower. It can be tricky to balance prioritizing your health with managing every other obligation. But better goals can bring better success. So *Healthier You* asked a panel of HMH physicians: What are the smartest (and actually achievable) resets that can boost physical and mental health? The experts shared 15 specific actions proven to get results. Some are so simple you can start them today, while others set meaningful targets to work toward this month or this year. Read on to feel better in 2026 — and beyond.

Today



1 Try Movement Microbursts

WHY: Short bouts of activity (one to four minutes) multiple times a day can lower heart disease risk by up to 40% and reduce joint stiffness. “You don’t need to dedicate an extended amount of time to exercise,” says James Hong Liu, M.D., who practices internal medicine in Hoboken.

TRY: To reap the cardio benefits of these micro-workouts, you need to exercise “vigorously,” Dr. Liu says, meaning “you break a sweat and feel your respiratory rate get faster.” Climb stairs briskly. Energetically march in place. Take a short, fast-paced outdoor walk.

“Work the activity into breaks in your schedule, such as when watching TV or at lunchtime,” suggests Catherine M. Cunningham, M.D., vice president and chief medical officer of Carrier Clinic.

2 Add Omega-3s and Fiber to Your Plate

WHY: Eating fiber lowers LDL cholesterol and colon cancer risk. Omega-3s protect against heart disease and slow cognitive aging. **TRY:** Add omega- and fiber-rich ground flaxseed to your oatmeal at breakfast, fiber-filled lentils to a salad at lunch, and omega-boosting salmon to tonight’s dinner. (For optimal omega-3s, Dr. Liu suggests wild-caught salmon over farm-raised.) Note that if you aren’t already eating significant fiber, “adding too much at once may be uncomfortable,” Dr. Liu warns. Rather than aim for an overnight overhaul, start with small swaps like replacing white rice with brown.

3 Do a One-Minute Mind-Body Reset

WHY: Sixty seconds of mindful breathing can lower blood pressure and stress hormones – protecting your cardiovascular and brain health. “We get so focused on the hustle and bustle of life,” says Dr. Liu. “Simple breathing exercises help to calm the heart rate and relax blood vessels and help us become more aware of ourselves.”

TRY: Take five slow, deep breaths (inhaling for four seconds, exhaling for six) before drafting your next email. Do a full-body scan after a stressful call. Focus on what you’re eating (smells, tastes, textures) as you start your next meal. “This will also slow down your eating so your body can register that it’s full,” says Dr. Cunningham.



4 Stay Connected

WHY: Social connection has been shown to reduce inflammation and dementia risk. “As times change, we’ve become more isolated,” observes Dr. Liu. “We get stimulation from electronics rather than from interacting with other people.” He acknowledges that, for less-outgoing individuals, socializing can be a challenge. But he encourages his patients to take small steps toward interacting regularly with neighbors, friends and family members.

TRY: Talk face-to-face with a co-worker rather than emailing. Play a board game with family rather than an online game alone. Before going to bed tonight, send a “walk and talk” invite to a friend.

5

Hydrate Smarter

WHY: Even mild dehydration thickens the blood (stressing the heart) and impairs joint lubrication. Staying hydrated also supports kidney and bladder health. Dr. Liu notes that signs of dehydration include dry skin, chapped lips and a higher heart rate.

TRY: “Drink lots of water, and eat hydrating fruits like watermelon and pineapple,” says Dr. Liu. “Your kidneys will expel what you don’t need.”

Keep a water bottle nearby as a visual reminder. “There are fancy models that light up at timed intervals to remind you to drink,” notes Dr. Cunningham. She adds that having a glass of water before every meal can also help with eating too fast or overindulging.



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This Month



1

Reset Sleep Routines

WHY: Adults who sleep seven to nine hours nightly have better cognitive performance and a lower risk of heart disease. The top sleep saboteur? “When you’re stressed, it affects sleep,” says Chandani Patel, M.D., a family medicine specialist in Waretown. (See “Settle Your Sleep: Break the Insomnia-Anxiety Cycle” in this issue.)

TRY: Rely on routines. Dr. Cunningham recommends doing breathing exercises to calm the nervous system while you brush your teeth. Limiting caffeine late in the day can help, as can skipping that after-dinner drink. “Even small amounts of alcohol can disrupt sleep,” she says, and sugary mocktails can, too. Rather than watching TV before bed, Dr. Cunningham suggests listening to a podcast. “No true crime! Keep it calming.”



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2

Book Your Checkup

WHY: Annual wellness visits significantly reduce late-stage cancer and cardiovascular mortality risk. Staying current on flu, COVID-19 and shingles vaccines can prevent infections that increase inflammation and heart strain. Annual labs (cholesterol, glucose and whatever your doctor recommends) give a data baseline so your physician can spot any changing trends early. “The results provide a snapshot in time of what’s happening in your body,” says Dr. Liu.

TRY: Schedule your annual physical this month. “Show up prepared with any questions and concerns,” says Dr. Cunningham. Keep expectations realistic about what you can fit into a single appointment. “Prioritize your top five questions, not your top 20.”



3

De-Stress Through Nature

WHY: Exposure to nature reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol and lowers blood pressure. “Getting sunlight also helps with circadian rhythms [your body’s internal clock] and mental stimulation,” says Dr. Liu.

TRY: Join a walking group (or start your own) for weekly strolls in a nearby park. “Having the accountability of doing outdoor activities together can be helpful,” says Dr. Cunningham. If you have limited mobility, even spending just 10 minutes outdoors in sunlight can boost your mood and energy. Get outside regularly, and you should notice benefits within a few weeks.



4

Make Strength Training a Habit

WHY: Twice-weekly resistance training may lower all-cause mortality by around 15%, and it preserves joint stability and bone density. “Starting around age 40, we see a decrease in bone density, especially in women,” notes Michelle Anne Wilks, M.D., a family medicine physician in Edison and Woodbridge. “To compensate, calcium and vitamin D supplements can help, but strength exercises are very important.”

TRY: Add two weekly 20-minute strength-training sessions, focusing on major muscle groups. Start with your body weight or resistance bands, and work up to 5- to 10-pound hand weights. Or just use jugs of water or kitty litter — you can even hoist your kids or grandkids.



5

Cook More Often

WHY: Research suggests cooking at home provides significant benefits over eating out, including consuming more fruits and vegetables as well as less sugar and fat, which lowers your risk of obesity. And “you’re in control of flavors,” says Dr. Wilks, as well as any substitutions you’d like to make. (See “Reset Your Diet: Simple Ingredient Swaps to Try Today” in this issue.)

TRY: Keep frozen broccoli, cauliflower and chopped spinach in your freezer. (These veggies often have as many or even more nutrients than fresh.) They make for easy side dishes throughout the week. Dr. Wilks mashes boiled cauliflower with a drop of olive oil and some seasonings to make a healthy version of “mashed potatoes.”

This Year

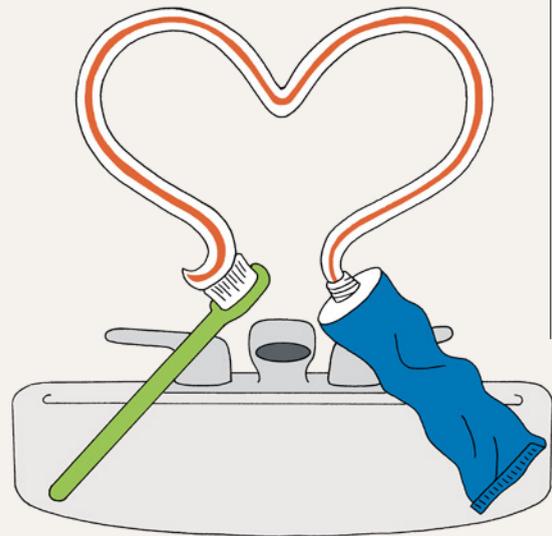


Build a Heart Health Action Plan

1

WHY: Even modest improvements in cholesterol, blood pressure and A1C numbers over the course of a year could significantly cut your risk of heart attack and stroke. Cholesterol screening frequency “depends on risk factors such as family history or BMI,” says Dr. Patel. For those who have high cholesterol and require treatment, it should be checked every three to 12 months, depending on any coexisting conditions.

TRY: Boosting heart health involves keeping track of your labs and taking other steps, like those in this article, to 1) manage stress, 2) exercise regularly and 3) make healthy eating updates. Little habits make a difference, too: Brushing and flossing your teeth regularly can prevent inflammation that leads to plaque formation in arteries.



Learn Something

2

WHY: Neuroprotective habits like continual learning can reduce dementia risk by 20% to 40%. **TRY:** Take up a new language, instrument or sport to build brain flexibility. “Be clear on your end goal,” says Dr. Patel, and on how to break it down into parts. For instance, if you aim to travel to a foreign country and communicate in the local language this December, practice twice a week for an hour, set six-month milestones for both understanding and speaking, and determine which areas you want to be most fluent in by year’s end.

“Aim to learn smaller things, too,” adds Dr. Cunningham. “Read a book about the Roman empire or try a small crocheting project.”

3 Take the Long View on Managing Stress

WHY: Chronic stress raises inflammation, affecting everything from heart health to immune function. “It affects your entire body,” explains Dr. Patel.

TRY: Beyond breathing exercises, nature breaks and other techniques to alleviate stress’s effects, dig deeper to examine what’s causing it. Is it related to specific aspects of your work, family or finances? Dr. Cunningham suggests differentiating things you can control (e.g., what you eat) or influence (how a work meeting goes) from things you can’t (weather, news, others’ behaviors). Give yourself permission to set boundaries where necessary. Do a monthly self-check on your stress level, and reach out to a therapist for an expert perspective. Let 2026 be the year you start feeling your best in mind, body and spirit.



MICHELLE ANNE WILKS, M.D.

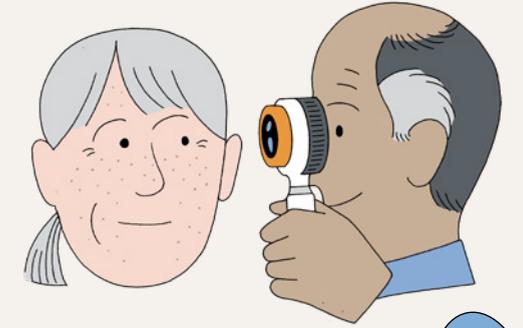
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Brush Up on Bone Health

WHY: Hormonal shifts — perimenopause, menopause, low testosterone, thyroid changes — impact bone density. Evaluation and early treatment can prevent long-term problems such as osteoporosis.

TRY: To preserve bone mass, Dr. Wilks says it can be helpful to make a bone health plan with your doctor that involves (along with strength training) eating a healthy, balanced diet rich in greens and calcium-loaded dairy products. She suggests talking through risk factors for fractures or osteoporosis, and recommends women get a bone density scan at 65, men at 70. Your doctor can also review your medications, since some, like prednisone, can cause bones to break down over time.



5

Commit to Preventive Cancer Care

WHY: Scheduling cancer screenings that are appropriate for your age, sex and risk is important. They allow your doctor to catch any cancers at their earliest and most treatable stage.

TRY: Follow the screening schedule your doctor recommends, including mammograms and Pap and HPV tests for women, prostate checks for men, and colorectal and skin checks for all. Going forward, set calendar reminders for all your screenings at the start of each year. Dr. Patel suggests scheduling any annual screenings, such as mammograms, at the same time every year. +

4



Customize your reset plan. Connect with a primary care provider at HMM.



Healthier Family: Understanding Childhood Vaccines

STAYING ON TOP OF childhood vaccines can feel overwhelming. There's a lot of confusing, contradictory and incorrect information out there. But for parents and caregivers, knowledge is power, so here are the facts on how childhood vaccines work, what their ingredients are and how they're tested.

Vaccines introduce your child's body to a germ, like a virus or bacteria. It's a tiny amount, so it won't make your child sick. But it will teach their body's immune "army" how to fight off the germ, by creating special guards called antibodies.

An antibody is a protein that watches for a germ and, if one is spotted, sounds the alarm for the immune army to go after it. These antibodies can stick around for years, even a lifetime. So if your child encounters that germ later, their body has a good chance of fighting it off (or having a less-severe infection).

What's in a Vaccine?

Every ingredient in a vaccine serves a specific purpose.

Antigens are the main ingredient — the harmless version of a germ that teaches the body how to identify and fight off the real

thing. An antigen can be made from a germ that's alive but very weak, or from a germ that's been killed or whose toxin has been neutralized. Alternatively, it can contain just a tiny piece of the germ, or (in mRNA vaccines) instructions for your child's body to make a piece of the germ itself.

Adjuvants help vaccines work better. They make the immune system react more strongly to the antigen so it can create the best protection. A common adjuvant in some vaccines is a tiny amount of aluminum salts, which have been safely used since the 1930s.

Stabilizers (often sugars) keep vaccines fresh, ensuring their active ingredients are working properly. They protect the vaccine from things like light and temperature changes.

Preservatives are added to vaccines that come in multidose bottles to prevent bacteria and fungi from growing inside, since even though doctors use a new needle every time, there's a small chance germs could get in. Many vaccines now come in single-use form, so they don't need preservatives.

Residuals are tiny traces of substances that may be left over from the manufacturing process.

Examples include antibiotics or formaldehyde, used to inactivate viruses. These help create a safe vaccine but are mostly processed out of the final product.

How Are Vaccines Tested?

Childhood vaccines go through a lot of testing before they're ever given to kids. Testing for all routine vaccines used in the U.S. follows a standardized process from the FDA.

Scientists first test the vaccine in a lab and on animals. Then human testing has three phases: First, a small group of volunteers (up to 100) receives the vaccine. Second, a larger group of people (hundreds) receives it. Third, thousands of people receive it. Vaccines for kids are usually tested in adults first, then in children and finally in infants.

Even after a vaccine is approved, scientists continue to watch for any rare or long-term side effects. This careful testing and ongoing monitoring help ensure that vaccines are as safe as possible. Protecting children, after all, is the whole point — and every parent's goal. +



What About Vaccine Side Effects?

While it's always a good idea to talk to your doctor about any concerns, especially if your child has allergies or other health conditions, serious side effects from childhood vaccines are very rare.

Most kids experience only mild side effects, such as:

- Soreness in the area where the shot was given
- Redness or hardness at the injection site
- Fever, typically low-grade

These usually go away within a day or two — and they're a good sign, showing that the immune system is responding to build future protection.

If you have any questions about side effects, talk to your doctor. They can help you understand what's normal and what's not.



Find more facts about childhood vaccines.



Healthier Family: Understanding the Shingles Shot

VACCINES — even routine ones for adults — can be a confusing topic these days. There are the regular shots for flu and COVID-19, the RSV shot for people ages 75-plus (or at increased risk), and the pneumonia shot for those 50-plus. Another one your doctor will likely recommend if you're 50 or older? The shingles vaccine.

If you or a loved one skipped this vaccine in the past, now is a great time to reconsider. Recently published research has shown that besides preventing shingles — caused by a viral infection that attacks the nervous system — it also can offer protection against dementia and other conditions.



Stay up to date on vaccines and more — connect with an HMH primary care provider near you.

CREDIT: TK

What Is Shingles?

One in three adults will get shingles during their lifetime, and risk increases with age. Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same culprit behind chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus remains in the body and can reactivate years later as shingles. Reactivation is commonly triggered by aging, a weakened immune system or high stress.

Shingles typically appears as a painful, blistering rash on one side of the body or face. It can cause itching, headaches, fever and sensitivity to touch. The blisters scab over in a week or so and tend to clear up within a month, but for some people, the pain remains and can be debilitating — known as postherpetic neuralgia.

Who Should Get the Vaccine — and Why?

For people ages 50 and older with a healthy immune system, the vaccine can reduce the risk of shingles and postherpetic neuralgia by more than 90%. The CDC also recommends it for younger adults who have weakened immune systems.

If you received the older version of the shingles vaccine (Zostavax®, discontinued in the U.S. in 2020), experts recommend getting the newer version (Shingrix),

which is given in two injections several months apart. You don't need boosters after that; you can get the vaccine — and its benefits — even if you've had shingles in the past; and there's no maximum age to receive it.

Side effects might include pain or swelling at the injection site, as well as up to two or three days of flu-like symptoms such as fatigue, fever or nausea. The long-term benefits, though, far outweigh any brief discomfort.

Besides preventing shingles, the vaccine may reduce the risk of developing dementia by 20%, according to recently published research following more than 280,000 people in Wales over seven years. Viruses like shingles that cause inflammation in the nervous system could contribute to dementia, so preventing shingles can lower this risk.

Another study that followed more than 1.2 million people in South Korea for up to 12 years suggests that the vaccine also can lower the risk of inflammation-related cardiovascular problems such as blood clots, heart attack, heart failure or stroke by 23%. That's even more reason to reconsider the broad benefits of shingles prevention. +



Beyond the Shingles Shot: More Ways to Help Prevent Dementia

Dementia is an umbrella term for a decline in mental function that interferes with daily life. It's not a single disease, but a group of symptoms that affect memory, thinking and social abilities. Dementia is sometimes considered a natural part of aging, but it's not — and there are ways to help prevent it.

Along with getting the shingles vaccine, you can:

- Stay active, aiming for 30 minutes of exercise most days
- Eat a healthy diet, such as the Mediterranean or similar MIND diet
- Work with your doctor to manage chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes
- Get treated for any mood or anxiety issues
- Prioritize getting high-quality sleep



Healthier Future: Innovations to Help You Breathe Easier

THERE'S GOOD REASON to be hopeful about innovations in screening, diagnosis and treatment for lung cancer, which causes more deaths in the U.S. than any other cancer. New procedures are allowing doctors to identify and treat it sooner. If it's caught at its earliest stage, before it spreads, the likelihood of surviving five years or more improves drastically, according to the American Lung Association. And now, a quick, painless low-dose CT (LDCT) screening at HMH is making earlier diagnosis easier, while other new technologies are improving options for biopsies and treatment. These innovations are helping to save lives.

Who Is LDCT Screening For?

LDCT screening is designed for those at high risk. If you're age 50 to 80 and have a history of smoking, even if you quit up to 15 years ago, ask your doctor if you should be screened.

An LDCT scan is generally recommended for people with a smoking history of 20 pack-years or more. (To calculate pack-years, multiply packs of cigarettes you smoked per day times the number of years you smoked.) Environmental and occupational exposures, such as to toxins or heavy smoke, may also mean you're at high risk.



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Though LDCT lung screenings have been around for a while, recommendations for who should get them have been refined based on ongoing research, and AI and other technology advancements have improved their accuracy. The challenge now is increasing awareness and adoption of the scans. "In states all across America, we typically end up screening less than 25% of people who qualify," says Stuart D. Campbell, M.D., a thoracic surgeon at Hackensack Meridian Health.

How Do LDCT Scans Work?

LDCT screening is a fast, pain-free imaging test that takes detailed pictures of the lungs. It uses a lower level of radiation than a standard CT scan and doesn't require any needles, IVs or contrast. "It's an open scan, so it doesn't cause claustrophobia," adds Dr. Campbell. You simply lie on a table that moves through the scanner while images are captured.

The information the scan provides is very precise. Unlike a chest X-ray, an LDCT scan can detect tiny lung lesions or nodules that may be early cancer.

What if My Scan Shows Something Suspicious?

Most LDCT screenings (more than 80%) do not find cancer. If nodules are spotted, it's important to keep in mind that many

are benign, caused by old infections or scarring.

Any abnormal result, though, calls for follow-up. Depending on how your nodule looks, your doctor may recommend that you repeat the scan over time or that you see a specialist.

In a conventional biopsy, a radiologist inserts a needle through the chest into a specific region of the lung. But if your nodule is too small or too risky to reach with this method, or if you have more than one, you still can often avoid a surgical biopsy with new, minimally invasive bronchoscopic biopsies.

Robotic bronchoscopy was first performed in New Jersey at Hackensack University Medical Center. "It allows us to perform complex procedures with no incisions going through the airway," Dr. Campbell says. "Patients can go home the same day."

The procedure starts with a CT scan that maps out the patient's airways. Using this imaging, the surgical team creates a virtual road map to the exact spot they need to biopsy. Then, a robotic-assisted catheter is used to move through the airways. "It allows doctors to gently navigate to hard-to-reach or very small lung lesions," Dr. Campbell explains.

"Better control and better reach can make the biopsy more accurate." The procedure typically takes only 30 to 60 minutes.

If biopsy results reveal cancer, it doesn't necessarily mean that a full lung or lobe will need to be removed. At HMH, newer, more-targeted, minimally invasive treatments may be an option. One of the newest is Aliya®, which destroys cancer cells with electrical pulses. Another advancement is a technology called Cytalux®, which helps surgeons identify and address tiny nodules. "These technologies help us focus on exactly what needs attention," Dr. Campbell says.

To take advantage of these innovations for lung screening, diagnosis and treatment, many people first need to overcome the emotions that prevent them from getting screened in the first place. Dr. Campbell sees patients hesitate due to worries about what their results might be, or due to guilt about smoking. "There can be a stigma on individuals who smoke, and that may make them feel like they 'have it coming,'" he says. "But the thing to focus on is that we now can catch lung cancer earlier, and if we do, it can be treatable." +



Take our free lung health assessment and find LDCT lung screening locations near you.

CREDIT: TK

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Your Checkup: Urgent Care or ER?

+ **WHETHER DUE TO** injury or illness, sometimes you instinctively know that you or a loved one needs care — immediately. But should you go to an urgent care location or the emergency room (ER)?

Even when the problem isn't life-threatening, people sometimes choose the ER because it's more familiar. (And of course there are times when you need its overnight availability.)

But in many cases, urgent care can save you significant time and money while still giving you the care you need. And HMH Urgent Care *PLUS* locations can treat more-complex issues and even offer CT scans, ultrasound imaging and on-site advanced lab testing.

So ask yourself: Do you know when to go where?



Find an HMH urgent care or ER location near you.

- ANSWERS**
1. ER.
 2. If the wound is deep or the bleeding severe, ER. Otherwise, urgent care.
 3. ER.
 4. Urgent care.
 5. If you have swelling or trouble breathing, ER. Otherwise, for milder reactions like rashes, urgent care.
 6. If you took a serious blow, especially with loss of consciousness, ER. Otherwise, if the bone is clearly displaced and you can't move the affected limb at all, ER. Otherwise, urgent care.
 7. Urgent care.
 8. ER.
 9. If patient is a child or senior, ER. If it's a large bone like the femur or pelvis, or if the break is in the spine, hip, neck or skull, ER. If there's an open fracture, with bone piercing the skin, ER.
 10. If patient is suicidal, aggressive or extremely erratic, ER. Otherwise, one of HMH's four Adult and Pediatric Behavioral Health Urgent Care locations.

WHERE WOULD YOU GO FOR:

1. Chest pain or discomfort
 URGENT CARE ER
2. A cut that needs stitches
 URGENT CARE ER
3. Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
 URGENT CARE ER
4. Flu, sore throat, etc.
 URGENT CARE ER
5. Allergic reaction
 URGENT CARE ER
6. Head injury
 URGENT CARE ER
7. Muscle strain or sprain
 URGENT CARE ER
8. Sudden numbness, weakness, confusion, or trouble with coordination or speaking
 URGENT CARE ER
9. Broken bone
 URGENT CARE ER
10. Mental health issue
 URGENT CARE ER

The Scan

Numbers to Know From This Issue — and Where to Learn More



The year heart disease was first established as the leading cause of death in the U.S. The good news? Quick screenings can now help you identify your risk and treat potential problems earlier than ever before. **PAGE 10**

1921

20 to 40%



How much neuroprotective habits like continual learning can reduce your dementia risk. Try a new language, musical instrument, sport or craft. It's just one of many achievable, expert-backed ways to reset your health habits in 2026. **PAGE 23**

50 TO 80

A yearly LDCT lung screening is recommended for people in this age range who smoke (or who quit within the past 15 years) and have a history of 20-plus pack-years. **PAGE 32**

20 minutes



Can't sleep? Don't lie awake in bed longer than this, HMH experts advise — get up and do something else. Uncover how practicing sleep efficiency can break the insomnia-anxiety cycle. **PAGE 8**

40%



Percentage of American women who'll face thinning hair by age 50. Two-thirds of men notice it by 35. But science-backed treatments can help save your strands. **PAGE 16**



Visit *Healthier You* online to find more on how to reset health habits.

86,000

Projected shortage of U.S. physicians by 2036, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. Learn how an HMH mentorship program is supporting future doctors — and how you can help. **PAGE 22**





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