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Spring Into Better Health
“We are grateful for our partnership with the Count Basie Center for the Arts,” says Robert C. Garrett, CEO of Hackensack Meridian Health. “After two years of COVID-19 restrictions, there are so many health benefits associated with getting out, socializing, and enjoying arts and entertainment again.”

**Spotlight on U**
**Health topics that matter the most to you**

**Below the Surface**
The warning signs of ovarian cancer. Plus: Seven tips for supporting someone with cancer.

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Hi. Welcome to this issue of HealthU
A message from Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, CEO of Hackensack Meridian Health.

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Quick tips to help you live your healthiest life.

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• Four ways to lower cholesterol
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Mental health is key to overall health.
Bob Garrett became a first-time grandparent this year with the birth of his granddaughter.

Health for Generations

They say everything changes when you become a parent. Our day-to-day looks different, our priorities shift, and it seems like our hearts expand to new sizes. I’ve long known that to be true, but I recently learned the same applies when becoming a grandparent.

Earlier this year, I became a first-time grandfather with the birth of my granddaughter. It’s been a joyous time and a great reminder to prioritize my health. If we want to be active participants in our children’s and grandchildren’s lives—and take part in all of their milestones—our health has to come first.

Part of putting our health first means eating well and staying active through regular exercise. That’s not always easy when we are on the go. In this issue, you’ll find three helpful tips for making time for physical activity amidst a busy schedule (page 5). On page 7, you’ll find a four-step recipe for grilled Greek salad using delicious and nutritious heart-healthy ingredients. You can always find additional tips for healthy eating and exercise at HMHforU.org.

I also encourage you to stay on top of preventive screenings. If you haven’t seen your primary care doctor in a while, schedule an annual wellness visit to check in and get recommended care. If you don’t have a doctor, you can search for one near you at HMHforU.org/FindADoc. You can also find an easy-to-reference guide for when to get which screenings at HMHforU.org/GetScreened.

Lastly, I encourage everyone—including my fellow grandparents—to get vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19, and to continue following appropriate protocols. The past few years have taught us a lot about resilience, and I often think about what I’ll tell my granddaughter someday about living through these challenging times. I know part of the story will be how fortunate I was to work with people who are committed to giving their all regardless of the challenge. The other part will be how so many of us in our community came together in a time of great need to care for those around us.

Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, CEO
Hackensack Meridian Health

Find more tips for living a healthier life at HMHforU.org/Exercise.
When there is less sunlight, some people may feel low, irritable, or experience other symptoms of depression during certain times of the year, especially months when there are fewer daylight hours.

Bright Side

Can light therapy lamps help with depression symptoms?

Bright light therapy—also known as phototherapy—is safely used to treat a number of illnesses, but the most common use is for a type of depression called major depressive disorder with a seasonal pattern. People who have this disorder experience symptoms of depression during certain times of the year, especially months when there are fewer daylight hours.

“Light therapy is not a cure, but it has been shown to help reduce symptoms that come with depression, such as lack of energy, trouble sleeping, anxiety, and feelings of sadness, hopelessness and irritability,” says Mindy Altschul, LCSW, assistant vice president, Clinical Quality, Carrier Clinic.

How Sunlight Affects the Brain

People with major depressive disorder with a seasonal pattern may want to sleep more for a certain period of time. The light may be set on the individual, treatment might last from 20 minutes up to three hours, and a person might use light therapy once or more per day for consecutive days until symptoms improve. A doctor can provide guidance on how long to use light therapy.

How Light Therapy Lamps Work

During light therapy, a person sits in front of a lamp and is exposed to very bright white light for a certain period of time. The light may be set on a lower lux level, which is how illumination is measured, then gradually increased. Depending on the individual, treatment might last from 20 minutes up to three hours, and a person might have light therapy once or more per day for consecutive days until symptoms improve. A doctor can provide guidance on how long to use light therapy.

“If symptoms of depression, decreased energy and poor sleep persist despite using light therapy, reach out to your physician or a mental health specialist at JFK University Medical Center,” says Grewal, M.D., family medicine specialist at JFK University Medical Center.

Consider these options:

1. Eat more fish. Fruits, vegetables, beans and whole-grain foods like oats or barley may help lower your LDL cholesterol levels.

2. Decrease animal fat (saturated fat). Saturated fats—typically found in beef, pork, cheese, butter, chicken skin and coconut oil—can increase your LDL and total cholesterol levels.

3. Avoid trans fats. To help lower your LDL cholesterol levels, reach for heart-healthy oils like olive oil or avocado oil instead of cooking with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils like margarine.

4. Go Mediterranean. Increasing nuts, avocados, olive oil, fish (think salmon or tuna), flaxseeds and leafy green vegetables in your diet may help lower LDL cholesterol levels.

Considerations:

Light therapy may not be right for everyone. If you experience any bothersome side effects such as headaches, eye strain, nausea or agitation, adjust your treatment by spending less time exposed to light, and be sure to ask your doctor for advice.

Where to Get a Light Therapy Lamp

You can buy a light therapy lamp or box online or at a home goods store. Medical device companies also sell them. They cost anywhere from $20-$500. Talk with your doctor about which light therapy device is right for you.

“Decreasing the number of light therapy sessions may help decrease your LDL cholesterol levels, and almost 10 percent have total cholesterol levels that are 240 mg/dL or higher, which puts them at greater risk of developing heart disease. ‘We no longer focus on total cholesterol, but we look at the good (HDL), bad (LDL), and ugly (triglycerides) components of cholesterol to guide a better understanding of risk for a heart attack or stroke, as well as guide ways to improve upon them,” says Grewal.

Consider the Following:

1. Mix the following ingredients with vinegar and oil, then set aside.

2. Before the oil starts to smoke, add the romaine, cut side down. Weigh the lettuce down with a heavy lid. There should be a nice sear within 2–4 minutes. Turn over and cover for another minute or two, then plate.

3. Spoon the mixture generously over the lettuce, sprinkle feta on top and serve.

Seasoned Cook

If you’re having this as a meal, add more protein with lentils, beans, chicken or canned fish. To make a Nicoise version of this dish, add tuna, an egg and potatoes. The lettuce makes a great base for other leftovers, too.

Nutritional Information

Per serving: 202 calories, 7g protein, 20g carbohydrates, 7g fiber, 12g fat (3g sat fat, 7g mono/poly, 295mg sodium

For additional tips on eating healthy, visit HMHforU.org/Nutrition.

Find more recipes and tips for healthy eating at HMHforU.org/HealthyEating.
What causes brain freeze?

Padminekha Rao, M.D., weighs in:

On a warm day, there is nothing like taking a big gulp of ice-cold water or a mouthful of ice cream, right? But then brain freeze hits you, and a sharp, intense pain occurs in the forehead or nose. This is often referred to as an ice cream headache and is medically known as a sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia. It happens when the cold hits the roof of your mouth or back of your throat, changing the temperature.

It is thought that the pain of brain freeze is caused by the triggering of the trigeminal nerve, which carries sensory information from your face and around your head to your brain. Once activated, the blood vessels constrict from the cooling. To adjust to the drastic temperature change, your body sends more blood to warm the affected area, causing the blood vessels to swell. It’s believed that brain freeze pain is caused by the constriction and then rush of blood.

Can wearables help you sleep?

Divya Gupta, M.D., weighs in:

Wearable sleep trackers are relatively new, and the information they provide about sleep is indirectly derived from heart rate, body movements, etc. This information is not as reliable as the data that doctors can get during an overnight sleep study in a sleep lab with sensors monitoring brain waves and nasal airflow. Wearable sleep trackers can’t reliably determine whether you’re falling asleep or if you’re already asleep. Since they can’t accurately assess how deep your sleep is, they aren’t good indicators of overall sleep quality—at least for now. They also aren’t adept at detecting short naps as periods of sleep. But wearable sleep trackers can encourage you to get more rest and establish good sleep habits. They can track the time you spend in bed, even if they don’t show exactly how long you’ve been asleep. If you’re serious about improving your sleep quality, and the data shows you aren’t getting 7–9 hours of rest, a wearable device may encourage you to consistently go to bed on time to ensure you clock enough time in bed.

If you track your sleep for a few weeks and notice problematic patterns, such as insufficient time in bed or middle-of-the-night tossing and turning, it may be helpful to discuss the data with your doctor to determine if you may have insomnia, sleep apnea, restless legs or another problem affecting your sleep.

Can you develop allergies as an adult?

Usha Sharma, M.D., weighs in:

While most allergies present themselves during childhood, it is certainly easy to develop them as an adult. In fact, it’s becoming increasingly common for people to develop allergies in adulthood. That may be due to several factors:

An aging population. As we age, our immune system begins to weaken over time, and we are more susceptible to illness, including allergies.

A changing environment. There are higher amounts of pollen and mold in our atmosphere, which may cause people who never had allergies to develop symptoms.

Hypervigilant focus on cleanliness. In the last few decades, we have become increasingly preoccupied with using antibacterial soaps, alcohol-based hand sanitizers and bleach for wiping down surfaces. As a result, our immune systems aren’t used to fighting off minor invaders, so our bodies can overreact with more concerning allergy symptoms.

If you notice allergy symptoms coming on shortly after an activity, such as eating a certain food, taking a new medicine, petting a cat or mowing the lawn, make an appointment to see your doctor. Your doctor may recommend that you see an allergy specialist and get tested to find out what you’re allergic to.

How often should you wash your clothes?

Andrew Habib, M.D., weighs in:

It depends on a few factors. You can follow this guide:

Wash new clothing before wearing
Wash these items after every use:
- Socks
- Underwear
- Bathing suits
- T-shirts
- Shirts that fit snugly and are worn directly against the skin
- Workout clothing you’ve sweated in
- Stained clothing
- Clothing worn while sick

Wash these items after two or three wears:
- Jeans
- Pants
- Pajamas
- Loungewear that you relax in around the house after you come home from work

Wash these items after four or five uses:
- Sweatshirts
- Sweaters
- Tank tops
- Dress clothing

How many uses before washing?

Sort by type:

Garment care labels can vary, so we recommend checking the label on every item you purchase to ensure you wash your clothes appropriately.
More than 21,000 American women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer every year, according to the American Cancer Society. But only about 20 percent of ovarian cancers are found early, a dismaying statistic stemming from several key factors, says Gara Sommers, M.D., gynecologic oncologist at JFK University Medical Center.

“The problem with ovarian cancer is that it doesn’t present with a lot of symptoms,” she explains. “There’s also no standardized screening test because, unfortunately, scientists haven’t yet discovered any that detect this cancer at an earlier stage.”

Dr. Sommers notes that Pap smears—screening tests for cervical cancer—do not look at the ovaries, so they do not screen for ovarian cancer.

**Hallmark Signs of Ovarian Cancer**

Another obstacle to ovarian cancer detection is the fact that early symptoms are often vague and resemble those of other ailments.

**These signs can include:**
- Bloating
- Fatigue
- Abdominal pain or pressure
- Nausea
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Feeling unusually full after eating
- Changes in bowel habits
- Bladder changes
- Lower back pain
- Menstrual changes
- Painful intercourse

If any of these symptoms are persistent or you experience them more than 12 times per month, Dr. Sommers urges you to make an appointment with your doctor.

**Risk factors for ovarian cancer can include:**
- Strong family history of breast cancer and/or ovarian cancer
- Mutations in BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, as detected by genetic testing
- Family or personal history of breast cancer occurring in both breasts
- Ashkenazi Jewish heritage

**Options for Treatment**

Traditional treatment for ovarian cancer includes surgery followed by chemotherapy. But another strategy being used now is giving chemotherapy to patients prior to surgery, a technique called neo-adjuvant chemotherapy. “We do neoadjuvant chemotherapy in patients who we feel we cannot offer optimal surgery upfront,” Dr. Sommers says.

Other recent advances include using three oral chemotherapy drugs, known as PARP inhibitors, as follow-up maintenance therapy for all women with ovarian cancer, regardless of gene mutations.

“Using this regimen, we’re seeing women experience longer periods without the disease recurring,” Dr. Sommers says.

Learn more about comprehensive care and treatments for gynecological cancers at HMforU.org/OvarianCancer.
There are many advantages to your kids participating in group sports and athletic activities. They get a chance to learn about physical fitness, improve their concentration skills and boost self-esteem.

While there are many valuable benefits, playing sports can potentially be a risky activity. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, injuries caused by youth sports account for nearly 3 million emergency room visits each year.

**Most Common Sports Injuries in Kids**

Some of the most common sports injuries for kids are overuse injuries, concussions and sprains.

**Overuse Injuries:** About half of kids’ sports injuries are the result of overuse. “An overuse injury can happen after focusing on one sport for an extended period or when taking on too much physical activity too quickly,” says Lawrence Stankovits, M.D., pediatric orthopedic surgeon at JFK University Medical Center. “These injuries can vary from stress fractures to tendinitis.”

**Concussions:** A concussion is caused by a mild blow or bump to the head. When the head gets hit, the sudden movement can cause the brain to bounce against or twist in the skull. “Concussions involve a temporary loss of normal brain function,” says Evan Curatolo, M.D., pediatric orthopedic surgeon at JFK. “They usually are not life-threatening but should be taken seriously.”

**Sprains:** When you have a sprain, you have stretched or torn the ligaments that connect your bones to joints. Sprains—more specifically ankle sprains—are some of the most common sports injuries in kids. A mild sprain can be cared for at home, while a more severe case may require surgery.

**5 Ways to Prevent Injury**

It’s important to encourage your children to play sports safely and properly. Drs. Stankovits and Curatolo provide tips for preventing sports injuries in kids.

- **Warm up and cool down.** Your child should be doing a warmup and cooldown before and after they participate in sports. A light warmup will improve mobility, increase blood flow and improve posture. Cooling down should focus on the gradual decrease of heart rate and sweating.

- **Use proper form.** Every sport has proper and improper ways to play. Your child should be shown the correct techniques and form by their coaches and trainers. If you are able, help them practice polishing their skills during off-seasons.

- **Wear proper protective gear.** Depending on the sport your child plays, they may need a helmet, padding, mouthguard, eye protection, cleats and protective cups.

- **Encourage nutrition and hydration.** Your child should drink fluids—whether that be water or a sports drink—before, every 20 minutes during, and after playing. This is even more crucial in hot and humid weather. Also be sure your young athlete is eating a well-balanced diet and maintains a regular eating schedule.

- **Don’t let your child participate while they’re injured.** When an injury is sustained, get help as soon as possible. Don’t let your child push themselves while they are in pain. Make sure they are fully healed before they return to play.

Learn more about family-centered care for kids at Hackensack Meridian Health at HMHforU.org/Kids.
**HEART HEALTH**

An Aspirin a Day?

Should you take a daily aspirin to help prevent a heart attack?

In October 2021, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force released updated recommendations for preventive aspirin use. Adults over age 60 should no longer consider taking a daily aspirin to prevent a first heart attack or stroke. For adults ages 40–59 who are at higher risk for cardiovascular disease and who do not have a history of cardiovascular disease, the task force now recommends they decide with their doctor if they should take a daily low-dose aspirin as a preventive measure.

“It’s important to know that someone should not start taking aspirin daily simply because they’ve reached a certain age,” says Aaron Feingold, M.D., division director of Cardiology at JFK University Medical Center. “The task force’s recommendations apply to people who are not currently taking a daily aspirin. If your doctor has recommended a daily low-dose aspirin to you because you’ve had a heart attack or stroke, this new guidance doesn’t apply to you.”

**How to Keep Your Heart Healthy**

“Heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States,” says Dr. Feingold. “As you get older, it becomes even more important to remain vigilant about your heart health.”

Maintaining heart health is a lifelong responsibility. Here are some things you can do to help your heart stay strong as you age:

- **Reduce your sodium intake** by cooking more meals at home. Be sure to read the labels on your food, as the recommended daily salt intake is just 1,500 mg.
- **Take time to rest and de-stress.** Make sure you are getting adequate sleep each night.
- **Lessen your alcohol intake.**
- **If you smoke, quit.** Smoking is very unhealthy and does a great deal of damage to the heart. Get the help you need to stop for good.
- **Commit yourself to exercising daily** for a minimum of 30 minutes.
- **Have open conversations with your doctors** and work with them to maintain your overall health.

Cardiac rehabilitation is essential to every step of Sam Persad’s recovery from a heart transplant and COVID-19.

Sam Persad was 58 years old when a heart attack changed his life. One day while he was working with his company’s owner tidying up the shop, he felt sudden pain in his chest. He ignored it—until the tightness persisted and he called his wife. Then, he called 911.

Surgeons placed stents in three severely blocked arteries. But his heart was too damaged for repair. A few days later, he was placed on a left ventricular assist device (LVAD) and began cardiac rehabilitation at the Center for Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute.

“The first thing they asked me was, ‘What is your goal?’” Sam says. “I said, ‘I want to be able to walk up and down the stairs and get to the bathroom.’ By the end of two weeks, I was walking with a cane and getting around, even up the stairs.”

Yet his heart was still failing, and it was determined that he needed a heart transplant. Sam was hospitalized during the six weeks it took for him to receive a donor’s heart, which took place October 3, 2020.

**Not Wasting This Gift**

Sam returned to the Center for Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation for in-patient rehab. He knew he could not survive at home and needed continued care as he moved forward with rehabilitation.

“I told the physical therapists and nurses to kick my butt. I want to walk again. I want to be where I was before my heart attack,” he recalls. “They worked with me. They pushed me. You don’t realize how much of your strength you lose when you are waiting for a heart transplant.”

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, Sam completed his rehabilitation exercises in his room. He was fearful of harming his new heart, but he trusted the nurses and therapists to monitor him. Once, they intervened when his blood pressure was off; for instance, they helped him with his fear that he would push himself too hard and damage his new heart.

“Not wasting this gift you have been given.” Sam’s son added. “You need rehabilitation to connect your new heart with your body. You must get in shape. You can’t waste this gift you have been given.”

Eventually, Sam went home with the plan to continue outpatient rehabilitation at the Center for Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation. Several months after his transplant, he contracted COVID-19, which lingered for several weeks. He credits the strength he gained from the rehabilitation process for helping him get through his battle with COVID-19.

Recently he returned from a trip to Missouri to see his first grandson, and he and his son went out for target practice. “It is amazing to me how strong I have gotten,” he says. “You need rehabilitation to connect your new heart with your body. You must get in shape. You can’t waste this gift you have been given.”

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Under Pressure

Why do your joints hurt during rainy weather?

Some people swear they can predict when rain is in the forecast because their joints start to ache. Other people notice similar discomfort during other weather events or when seasons change.

Experts believe that joints may ache among affected people because of changes in barometric pressure, which occur during weather system changes. Before it rains, barometric pressure tends to decrease.

When this happens, there is less air pressure exerting itself on your body, which may allow muscles, tendons and other tissue surrounding the joints to expand. The expansion may crowd the joints, putting extra pressure on them, which may lead to pain.

People with arthritis or those who experience chronic joint pain may be more sensitive to this type of discomfort, which is caused by tissue taking up more space than usual and overburdening the joints,” says Jeffrey Charen, M.D., orthopedic surgeon at JFK University Medical Center.

Other Reasons for Weather-related Joint Pain

You may do things differently on rainy or cold days, which may contribute to joint pain. For example:

- You may be less physically active, and sitting idly may make your muscles and joints stiffen up, causing pain.
- The gloomy weather may sour your mood, causing you to focus on negatives, including joint pain.
- You may have come to expect joint pain during rainy or cold weather, so you may be on the lookout for any twinges and discomfort that might not otherwise cause concern.

How to Minimize Pain

Try these strategies to ward off or reduce weather-related joint pain.

- Exercise regularly. Being physically active helps strengthen your muscles and bones, which takes pressure off your joints.
- Keep moving. Find ways to get in your usual activity, even if you can’t walk around the block. Consider walking at the mall or using a treadmill.
- Stretch before moving. Do a few stretches before you do any physical activity. You’ll warm up your muscles and improve your flexibility, which are good for your joints.
- Keep your weight in a healthy range. Lose weight if you’re overweight or maintain your current weight if it’s in the healthy range. Carrying around extra weight puts additional strain on your joints, including the knees and hips, which may intensify weather-related joint pain.
- Use heat before activity and cold after. A heating pad may help relax your muscles and loosen you up before activity, while cold afterward can help with swelling and inflammation.
- Take over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medication. Medications like ibuprofen help reduce pain and lower inflammation, which should help you feel better.
- Try to maintain a positive outlook. Don’t let a gray, miserable day bring down your mood. When you feel better emotionally, you may also feel better physically.

Chronic back pain was impacting Jonathan Munoz’s life at work and on stage as a musician. Physical therapy changed all of that.

When Jonathan Munoz of Metuchen, New Jersey, was 18, he started a job that required lifting heavy crates and boxes. By the time he turned 21, the repetitive physical demands of his work had taken a toll.

“I was lifting so much weight at work that it messed up my back,” says Jonathan, who also moonlights as a guitar player and singer.

Over several years, Jonathan’s back pain became so severe that even standing hurt. His pain also affected his ability to give his best when performing during off-work hours. He had to stop moving around on stage and sometimes avoided playing shows altogether.

“I was afraid the pain would get worse as I get older if I didn’t do something,” Jonathan says.

Seeking Relief

Jonathan scheduled an appointment with Craig Van Dien, M.D., a sports medicine specialist at the Center for Sports and Spine Medicine at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute.

“Jonathan had chronic back pain that wasn’t getting better,” Dr. Van Dien says. “After listening to Jonathan’s story, I was able to tailor his treatment plan to focus on improving body mechanics, as well as exercises to build core and extremity strength.”

Dr. Van Dien also suggested that Jonathan work with a physical therapist at JFK Johnson to personalize exercises and stretches to target specific muscles.

Starting Slow to Get Strong

Jonathan was nervous about starting physical therapy at first.

“It was scary because I didn’t want to exercise and make the pain worse,” he says. “But after about a month, I started to notice improvement.”

Adds Dr. Van Dien: “Exercise avoidance is common with patients with chronic back pain. We serve an important role in helping patients overcome their fear and boost exercise confidence.”

As Jonathan became stronger through one-on-one physical therapy sessions, he slowly increased the intensity of the exercises. His physical therapist even worked with him to improve his body mechanics while playing guitar, so he could play for more extended periods without pain.

Gaining Self-care Tools

According to Jonathan, getting professional medical treatment was key to his recovery and ability to return to an active lifestyle.

“Now, I can walk around while I perform and have the tools to take care of myself,” he says. “Going to see Dr. Van Dien was the best decision I could have made.”

Adds Dr. Van Dien: “When you work with a therapist, you receive education and lifelong skills you can use to manage chronic back pain the right way and reduce the risk of further injury.”

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Jonathan scheduled an appointment with Craig Van Dien, M.D., a sports medicine specialist at the Center for Sports and Spine Medicine at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute.

“Jonathan had chronic back pain that wasn’t getting better,” Dr. Van Dien says. “After listening to Jonathan’s story, I was able to tailor his treatment plan to focus on improving body mechanics, as well as exercises to build core and extremity strength.”

Dr. Van Dien also suggested that Jonathan work with a physical therapist at JFK Johnson to personalize exercises and stretches to target specific muscles.

Starting Slow to Get Strong

Jonathan was nervous about starting physical therapy at first.

“It was scary because I didn’t want to exercise and make the pain worse,” he says. “But after about a month, I started to notice improvement.”

Adds Dr. Van Dien: “Exercise avoidance is common with patients with chronic back pain. We serve an important role in helping patients overcome their fear and boost exercise confidence.”

As Jonathan became stronger through one-on-one physical therapy sessions, he slowly increased the intensity of the exercises. His physical therapist even worked with him to improve his body mechanics while playing guitar, so he could play for more extended periods without pain.

Gaining Self-care Tools

According to Jonathan, getting professional medical treatment was key to his recovery and ability to return to an active lifestyle.

“Now, I can walk around while I perform and have the tools to take care of myself,” he says. “Going to see Dr. Van Dien was the best decision I could have made.”

Adds Dr. Van Dien: “When you work with a therapist, you receive education and lifelong skills you can use to manage chronic back pain the right way and reduce the risk of further injury.”
RISK FACTORS FOR STROKE
Risk factors for stroke include:
- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Heart diseases such as cardiomyopathy and atrial fibrillation
- Diabetes
- Age (your risk increases as you get older)
- Gender (men are more likely to have strokes)
- Taking hormonal birth control
- Race/ethnicity (strokes occur more often in African American, Alaska Native and American Indian adults)
- Personal or family history of stroke or heart disease
- Brain aneurysms or blood vessel malformations
- Obesity
- Poor diet
- Alcohol/illegal drug use
- COVID-19

10 TIPS TO REDUCE YOUR RISK
Dr. Uhrik offers these tips to reduce your risk of stroke:
1. Check your blood pressure regularly. If you have elevated blood pressure consistently, talk to your doctor about treatment to control it.
2. Get tested for diabetes, especially if you have a family history of it.
3. Get a heart health check. Heart disease, heart weakness or cardiac arrhythmias such as atrial fibrillation can cause blood clots to shoot to the brain, causing a stroke.
4. Be vigilant about your cholesterol. Many vessel-clogging problems that occur in the heart from high blood fats (cholesterol) also occur in the blood vessels leading to the brain. So it’s important to regularly check your cholesterol and make necessary dietary or medication changes to lower it.
5. Maintain a healthy weight. Obesity on its own is a risk factor for stroke. But it also can lead to other health issues such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes, which are additional stroke risk factors.
6. Eat foods low in cholesterol and fats, especially saturated fats and trans fats, such as lean meats, nonfat dairy and whole-grain breads.
7. Exercise regularly. Aim for 30 minutes a day, five days a week. But even 10 minutes of exercise a day offers health benefits.
8. If you smoke, stop. Smoking can damage blood vessels as well as the heart. It also can increase blood pressure and lead to decreased oxygen supply from the lungs.
9. Drink less alcohol. Even one or two drinks a day can increase the risk of high blood pressure and stroke.
10. Reduce stress. Stress can alter blood sugar and raise blood pressure as well as cause cardiac rhythm irregularities.

THE BEST TREATMENT FOR STROKE IS PREVENTING IT
The best treatment for stroke is preventing it from happening in the first place, which means making lifestyle choices that keep your blood vessels and heart strong and healthy,” Dr. Uhrik says.  

How to Beat Brain Fog
What is brain fog? While it’s not a medical term, brain fog describes a feeling that you don’t have full mental clarity—maybe you’re having trouble remembering something or difficulty focusing on a thought or idea. This can happen to anyone and can be caused by lack of sleep, increased stress, certain foods in your diet or, in some cases, a medication or medical condition.

Regardless of the source of brain fog, you can help combat it with these steps:

IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP
Aim to get 7–9 hours of sleep each night. Keep a regular sleep routine, and go to bed at the same time every night. In addition, avoid screens before you go to bed.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF
Treat your brain like a muscle and make sure it gets its exercise. This can take the form of traditional mind-sharpening puzzles and games, but it can also extend to your daily life. Read and learn about a topic you are interested in, whether it’s something that will help you in your work or a hobby.

REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT
If you are having trouble with memory in particular, repetition can be a useful strategy. Repeating something will strengthen your memory of it. For example, when you’re having a conversation with a new person, repeat their name back to them. Or after you make an appointment, write it down.

GET PLENTY OF EXERCISE
Studies have shown that getting regular exercise and eating a diet high in vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains can reduce cognitive decline. These behaviors not only have cognitive benefits, but they can also improve your sleep, benefiting your mind even more.

Eric Uhrik, D.O., FAAN
Neurologist
800-822-8905
East Brunswick

Learn about lifesaving stroke care close to home at HMHforU.org/Stroke.
Heads Up

What type of headache might you be experiencing, and what can you do about it? Our neurologist weighs in.

Headaches are incredibly common. There are many types, all of which have different causes, characteristics and treatment options. Brian L. Gerhardstein, M.D., Ph.D., director of headache medicine at JFK University Medical Center, offers insight on the three most common types of primary headaches.

Migraines

Symptoms: A person with a migraine typically reports moderate to severe throbbing pain often located on one side of the head. The headache may last for hours or days. Migraines are commonly associated with nausea and vomiting as well as sensitivity to light or sound.

Causes: The underlying cause of migraines is under investigation, although there is probably a genetic component since they often run in families. Migraine triggers include:

- Stress
- Dehydration or hunger
- Certain foods
- Medications
- Bright lights

Treatments: Options for treating migraines include simple lifestyle changes, therapy or medications to treat pain.

Tension Headaches

Symptoms: Tension headaches are due to muscle tension and are characterized by a dull pain and tightness or pressure in the head or neck. They can last less than an hour or up to a few days.

Causes: Triggers of tension headaches include:

- Physical or emotional stress
- Hunger and dehydration
- Not getting enough sleep
- Teeth/jaw clenching
- Anxiety and depression
- Fatigue

Treatments: Tension headaches are usually managed with over-the-counter pain medication. “If you experience frequent or prolonged headaches, or if they don’t improve with self-care, it may be time to see a doctor,” Dr. Gerhardstein says. “If your doctor diagnoses tension headaches, they may recommend lifestyle changes, therapy or medications to treat pain.”

Cluster Headaches

Symptoms: Cluster headaches generally occur behind or around the eye on one side and can be very painful. These headaches often occur for a few weeks or months, typically at night. They may go away for a period of time but can spontaneously start again. Symptoms include:

- Severe throbbing pain
- Feeling flushed
- Tearing up
- Sniffling with a runny nose
- Redness around an eye

Causes: The cause of cluster headaches is under investigation. This type of headache usually isn’t associated with triggers such as food or stress, like other headache types.

Treatments: If you are experiencing cluster headaches, Dr. Gerhardstein recommends seeing a doctor. “It’s important to find a doctor who can diagnose cluster headaches and work with you to find an effective treatment.”

Make an appointment to discuss your headache with your doctor if they are becoming more severe, more frequent, unresponsive to treatments or are associated with any new or worsening symptoms.

Go Online

Learn about headache and migraine treatments at Hackensack Meridian Health or HMHealth.org/Headache

NRIPEN DONTINENI, M.D.
Internal medicine
JFK University Medical Center

If listening to Beyoncé and playing tennis aren’t two things you associate with a doctor of internal medicine, you probably haven’t met Nripen Dontineni, M.D. The internist has been with Hackensack Meridian Health since April 2020, and he has been using his preventive approach to medicine to help patients live longer, healthier lives.

Born in India, Dr. Dontineni came to the U.S. for the first time to start his residency in New York. He has earned the distinction of Civil Surgeon from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which allows him to perform the medical exams required for Green Card applicants. Having gone through the immigration process himself, he chose to pursue the Civil Surgeon certification to help other immigrants on their own journeys.

As an internist, Dr. Dontineni treats a wide range of medical conditions. Internal medicine involves diagnosing, treating and preventing disease in adults, and an internist is a type of primary care provider for patients 18 years and older. Dr. Dontineni prefers, however, to prioritize prevention.

What is your best advice to patients to live a healthy life?

I tell my patients that prevention is better than a cure. I encourage them to prioritize prevention with healthy lifestyles. Calorie control is the first thing I advise for patients. Boiled vegetables with some dipping sauce for flavor are my go-to healthy snacks. I also believe we should keep aside 30–40 minutes per day for exercise. Brisk walking is my favorite exercise.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

I love spending time with my wife and two children, especially traveling. My favorite family vacation was in Hawaii on a “road trip to Hana” on the Island of Maui. I also like to play badminton, tennis and table tennis with my kids. Winning is easy with them! I also like to listen to podcasts. As an internal medicine specialist, my favorite is “Harrison’s PodClass.”

To make an appointment with Dr. Dontineni, call 800-822-8905 or visit HMHealth.org/FindADoc.

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Innovation transforming medical research into treatments

Seeking a Cure

Innovation is at the heart of a new potentially curative treatment for sickle cell disease. Spring 2022

Hackensack Meridian Health is at the heart of a new potentially curative treatment for sickle cell disease.

The trait is widely known to exist in African bloodlines, but it’s also present in Hispanic, Mediterranean and even Arab-Indian lineages.

Sickle cell disease afflicts 100,000 Americans, including 1 in every 365 African American births and 1 in every 16,000 Hispanic American births.

Sickle cell disease is an inherited blood disorder wherein misshapen blood cells impede the vascular distribution of oxygen throughout the body, causing pain, organ damage and even stroke.

“When you have sickle cell disease, you have a mutation in your beta-globin gene that causes your red blood cells to sickle—to be crescent-shaped instead of round,” says pediatric hematologist/oncologist Alfred Gillio, M.D., director of the Children’s Cancer Institute at Joseph M. Sanzari Children’s Hospital.

Sickle cell disease affects every organ in a patient’s body,” says Dr. Rifkin-Zenenberg. “This disease really has a tremendous effect not only on the patient, but also the family.”

Sickle cell disease runs in families, but the inherited trait that causes it is recessive. “Sickle cell disease is inherited in an autosomal recessive manner, so children can carry the trait and not have the disease,” says Jessica Scerbo, M.D., section chief, pediatric hematology oncology at K. Hovnanian Children’s Hospital. “Babies only carry the trait if both of their parents.”

The trait is widely known to exist in African bloodlines, but it’s also present in Hispanic, Mediterranean and even Arab-Indian lineages.

New Treatments Emerge

Today, there are two curative treatments for sickle cell disease. The first is a bone marrow transplant, which replaces a patient’s unhealthy blood-forming cells with healthy ones provided by a donor. This requires finding a well-matched (HLA-matched) bone marrow donor. “Siblings only have a 25 percent chance of being tissue-matched. A volunteer-matched donor or a half-matched donor can often be identified, although these alternative donor transplants can be associated with more complications,” says Dr. Rifkin-Zenenberg.

A second therapy is currently undergoing clinical trials at sites across the country, including Joseph M. Sanzari Children’s Hospital. “The new therapy, called Lentiglobin, is a gene-based therapy where doctors harvest the patient’s own stem cells and add to them a corrected gene that makes non-sickle hemoglobin,” says Dr. Rifkin-Zenenberg, the principal investigator of the gene therapy study.

“With this treatment, the patient’s own donor, and we are modifying their own cells to add copies of a functional beta-globin gene,” Dr. Gillio says.

5 Things to Know About Sickle Cell Disease

You can carry the sickle trait even if you don’t have sickle cell disease.

Sickle cell disease can occur in people of any ethnicity.

Pain “crises” are sickle cell disease’s signature symptom.

Sickle cell disease can cause organ damage, stroke and even death.

There are potential cures for sickle cell disease.

hope when there are no options

If its curative effects hold, gene therapy could prove to be even more attractive than bone marrow transplants.

Gene therapy also surmounts graft-versus-host disease, a common transplant complication where immune cells in the donor’s marrow recognize that they’re in a foreign body and begin attacking the marrow recipient. “Graft-versus-host disease can be significant and life-threatening, and when we use the patient’s own cells, we don’t have to worry about it,” Dr. Rifkin-Zenenberg says.

This investigational treatment, which is a one-time therapy, may be an option for patients who have no other treatment options. “This therapy may be a major advance for sickle cell patients. The results from early clinical studies are encouraging,” Dr. Gillio says.

To learn more about the sickle cell clinical trial, contact the study research staff at pedsresearch@hmhn.org or call 551-996-5600.

Hackensack Meridian Health.org


Go Online to learn more about the sickle cell clinical trial, contact the study research staff at pedsresearch@hmhn.org or call 551-996-5600.

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Special Events

**Stroke: How Do I Know if I am at Risk?** May is National Stroke Awareness Month. Join Spothmy Panzezi, M.D., and learn what to do if someone is having a stroke, the signs/symptoms and risk factors.

May 18, noon–1 p.m., virtual event

**Diabetes**

Eat Well: Living With Diabetes Join our certified diabetes educator and learn how nutrition affects diabetes, meal planning and more.

May 4, 7 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Behavioral Health**

**Men’s Health Month**

Join our men’s health experts and learn important health topics just for men, including the top 10 health and wellness considerations, the importance of strength training and why mental health should not be taboo for men!

June 1, 1–2 p.m., virtual event

Heart Health

**Mediterranean Diet: How Does It Affect Your Cholesterol?** Join Monica Bain, M.D., and learn all about the Mediterranean diet and how it can affect your cholesterol levels for the better.

June 2, 6–7 p.m., virtual event

**Can You Feel the Beat? Heart Rhythm Disorders**

Speaker: Matthew Saybolt, M.D., June 22, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Angioscreen**

Special rate: $49.95. Registration required. Call for dates, times and locations.

**Cancer Care**

**Fresh Start Smoking Cessation**

This four-session program is available to help you quit smoking. Attendance is required at all four sessions.

May 6, 8, 13 & 18, June 3, 6, 10 & 13 and July 1, 11, 15 & 18, 10–11 a.m., Riderview Rechnitz Conference Center

May 17, 19, 24 & 26, 6–7:30 p.m., Ocean, East Wing

**Thriving and Surviving Cancer Survivor Workshop**

May 17, 19, 24 & 26, 6–7:30 p.m., Ocean, East Wing Conference Center

**The Psychological Impact of Cancer**

Speaker: Patrick Kane, M.D., July 7, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Neuroscience**

**Are You Getting a Good Night’s Sleep?**

Join Rana T. Ali, M.D., and learn tips on getting a good night’s sleep, as well as sleep apnea and treatment options.

May 11, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Advances in Multiple Sclerosis**

Speaker: Kiippa Pandey, M.D., June 15, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Headaches vs. Migraines**

Speaker: Monte Pellmar, M.D., June 18, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**General Wellness**

**Living With Arthritis**

Join Sundeep Saini, D.O., and learn about different types of arthritis, as well as diagnosis and treatment options.

June 2, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Healthy Vision**

Speaker: Ralph Dell Negro, D.O., May 18, 4–5 p.m., virtual seminar

**Weight-loss Surgery**

To learn more about weight-loss surgery, attend a free seminar. To find a seminar near you, visit HackensackMeridianHealth.org/WeightLoss.

**Support Groups**

Hackensack Meridian Health offers regular support group meetings. Learn more at HackensackMeridianHealth.org/SupportGroups.

**Pediatrics**

**Safe Sitter**

Babysitter training for boys and girls ages 11–14. The class includes handling emergencies, childcare skills, CPR and first aid. Fee: $40. Visit HackensackMeridianHealth.org/Events for upcoming dates.

**Safe at Home by Safe Sitter**

Speaker: Krupa Pandey, M.D., June 15, 11 a.m.–noon, virtual event

**Is Your Child Complaining of Pain?**

Speakers: Amit Merchant, M.D., and Paul Haynes, M.D., May 19, 8:30–9:30 p.m., virtual event

Parent/Guardian Talks:

**In Your Child Complaining of Pain?**

Speakers: Amit Merchant, M.D., and Paul Haynes, M.D., May 19, 8:30–9:30 p.m., virtual event
Home Away From Home

Former team member Eugene Mercado gives back to Raritan Bay Medical Center after experiencing compassionate care while his mother was in hospice.

Raritan Bay Medical Center has always held a special place in Eugenio "Eugene" Mercado, Jr.’s heart. Not only was he born there, but for 34 years, it provided him a fruitful and rewarding career. "The fact that Mr. Mercado chose to give back after a long career with us speaks volumes about the kind, generous person he is. The Eugenio 'Eugene' Mercado, Jr. Patient Care Fund he created will provide meaningful gifts from the Foundation so people could continue to work and live their lives, knowing that their loved ones with dementia were taken care of," he says. What started as a possible planned gift, led to a gift of $25,000 to create the Eugenio "Eugene" Mercado, Jr. Patient Care Fund at Raritan Bay. The fund will provide support for patients dealing with dementia, Alzheimer’s disease and cancer. "It only makes sense to give back to the hospital that has given my family and me so much—life, a career and such great care," Eugene says.

Raritan Bay is thrilled with his gift. "Mr. Mercado’s generosity will provide funding for program support and other essentials that will ensure the comfort of our patients, which is of the utmost importance," says Melissa L. Magyar, executive director of the Foundation. "We are grateful for Mr. Mercado’s commitment throughout his career and now as a retired employee and donor."

Eugene was so grateful that he decided to give back to Hackensack Meridian Raritan Bay Medical Center Foundation. "I wanted to do something so people could continue to work and live their lives, knowing that their loved ones with dementia were taken care of," he says. What started as a possible plan...
Behind the Scenes of COVID-19

See firsthand, honest accounts from Hackensack Meridian Health team members on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic in our new video series, UNMASKED.

Watch team members from across the network open up about the struggles, moments of frustration and intense bonds that have formed while working in these unprecedented times.

Learn more or watch the latest episodes at HMHforU.org/Unmasked.

We Are Hiring!

We are looking for individuals who are passionate about health care to join our growing team, where great benefits, robust learning and development programs, and more perks are offered. Both clinical and non-clinical positions are open in our health care facilities throughout New Jersey.

See open positions at jobs.hackensackmeridianhealth.org or scan the QR code.

As the state’s largest, most comprehensive health network, Hackensack Meridian Health is made up of 7,000 physicians, 17 hospitals and more than 500 locations. For a complete listing of our hospitals, services and locations, visit HackensackMeridianHealth.org/Locations.