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HealthNet News

March/April 2017

Linking Connecticut Patients and Families to Reliable Health Information

In this issue:

Shopping for Health Insurance Made Easier

HealthPocket is a free website that shows all insurance plans in your region and lets you filter them by cost, prescription coverage and other details. The site is free, and gathers no personal information about its users. HealthPocket searches for individual plans as well as Medicare, Medigap, short-term medical insurance, dental insurance, and small business plans. A search of my zip code for individual health insurance plans quickly generated a list of 34 plans ranked from least to most expensive. Insurance terms like "deductible" and "out-of-pocket maximum" are explained in plain English. An 800 number lets you chat with a licensed insurance agent. For a specific plan, you can print a summary of benefits, and see a list of physicians in your area who accept that insurance.

Keep Your Distance

Under a recent court order, California public health officials released draft guidelines advising cell phone users to keep phones away from their bodies. The guidelines also recommend that phone owners use speaker phone and limit phone use. The guidelines, first reported by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, inform Californians that scientific studies have linked electromagnetic radiation from long-term cell phone use to an increased risk of brain cancer and other health problems.

More Cell Phone Woes

Distracted driving... there's an app that measures that. Cambridge Mobile Telematics (CMT), sells an app which collects data from drivers including phone use while driving, speeding, braking, acceleration, cornering and time of driving. According to the *Washington Post* data collected from thousands of drivers using the CMT app showed in nearly 25 percent of crashes, the driver was using a phone within a minute before the crash occurred. CMT believes that smartphones also hold the solution to distracted driving. Data from apps like theirs give drivers immediate and ongoing feedback to analyze their driving and change their behavior.

Mindful Eating

How many of us sprinkle blueberries on our cereal or drink green tea to keep our brains sharp? Researchers at the University of Toronto, Rush University Medical Center, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health say focusing on individual foods to ward off mental decline is misguided. Instead, researchers at these institutions are testing two new diets designed to boost brain health. The "Canadian Brain Health Food Guide" is similar to the Mediterranean diet, but adapted to Western eating habits. It is associated with a 36 percent decrease in the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. The MIND diet, created by Rush University and Harvard, is a hybrid of the Mediterranean diet and the DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension). The MIND diet lowered the risk of Alzheimer's by 53 percent. Check out this article on Kaiser Health News to learn more about these two diets and how nutrition affects the brain.

Surprising Source of Dietary Salt

Where does most of the salt in our diets come from? The salt shaker does not count. Pizza? Fast food? Nope. The answer is yeast breads. According to a newly published study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) breads account for 6 percent of the salt we eat. The top five salty sources: yeast breads, pizza; sandwiches; cold cuts and cured meat; and soups. The CDC report also notes that just 10 food groups account for over 40 percent of our dietary salt. Reducing the amount of salt we eat can lower our blood pressure. High blood pressure puts us at risk for heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends we eat less than 2400 milligrams of salt a day. This is about 1 teaspoon. On average, Americans eat more than 3400 milligrams of

salt a day. Curious about the amount of salt in other foods you eat? You can find out on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Composition Database.

Healthy School Buildings Fundamental to Student Success

School buildings with mold, poorly ventilated air, uncomfortable temperatures, inadequate lighting, and high noise levels can negatively affect student health, thinking, and performance. By the time a student graduates from high school, she or he has spent 15,600 hours inside a school. Researchers from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health reviewed over 200 scientific studies of the effects of chronic exposures to common environmental factors in school buildings. They found "unambiguous evidence" that school buildings affect student health and academic success. School districts that improved school infrastructure have seen dramatic benefits in children's academic performance. Click here to read the report, *Schools for Health: Foundations for Student Success.*

Top Hospitals Promote Unproven Alternative Therapies

Hospitals affiliated with top medical research centers like Yale, Duke, Johns Hopkins, and Cleveland Clinic are aggressively promoting alternative therapies for which there is little or no evidence of effectiveness. Websites for these hospitals are pitching treatments ranging from acupuncture for infertility to energy healing for multiple sclerosis, and bee venom for fibromyalgia. Some hospitals have built luxurious spas charging patients for memberships with fees for actual treatments billed separately. Journalists at STAT News researched marketing of alternative therapies at 15 premiere research centers across the U.S. Although the physicians affiliated with the alternative therapy services noted that alternative therapies may complement traditional treatments, and are not curative, this message does not appear to be communicated to patients. Where can you find evidence for whether alternative therapies work? Here are some free suggestions: MedlinePlus.gov's "Herbs and Supplements" section and "Alternative Therapies" topic page; National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health; Cochrane Collaboration (abstracts of systematic reviews); American Academy of Medical Acupuncture; Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine; NIH Office of Dietary Supplements; and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The website Quackwatch.org is dedicated to debunking fraudulent health claims. Not comfortable doing your own research? Call a hospital or medical library. You can locate a medical library using the "Directory" feature on the MedlinePlus.gov website.

Spinach is King of Leafy Greens - but Buy Organic

Move over kale. Spinach is taking the nutritional spotlight. In fact, Spinach has its own day of recognition. March 26 is National Spinach Day! According to Nutritionfacts.org, spinach appears to be protective against many types of cancer. It is rich in folate which supports mental health and lower risks of depression and anxiety disorders. A third cup of spinach a day is recommended for optimal eye protection against age-related macular degeneration. Spinach is also a good source of niacin which can improve blood vessel function, athletic performance and even the appearance of wrinkles. You can check out spinach's nutritional profile on the USDA Food Composition Database. Just make sure you purchase organic spinach. Conventionally grown spinach is number 2 on the Environmental Work Group's (EWG) "Dirty Dozen" list. EWG publishes an annual list of the the 12 produce items with the highest levels of pesticides. EWG's data comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which annually tests produce for pesticide levels.

Senior-Friendly Cities

Location, location, location! This advice applies to first-time home buyers as well as those thinking about where to retire. Most people retiring want to age in place. The Milken Institute's "Center for the Future of Aging" has released a report ranking over 300 large and small U.S. metropolitan areas to see how well those cities support successful aging. They evaluated cities on general livability, health care, wellness, financial security, education, transportation and convenience, employment, living arrangements, and community engagement. The top 5 large cities: Provo-Orem, UT; Madison, WI; Durham-Chapel Hill, NC; Salt Lake City, UT; and Des Moines, IA. The top 5 small cities: Iowa City, IA; Manhattan, KS; Ames, IA; Columbia, MO; and Sioux Falls, SD. The Institute's report, "Best Cities for Successful Aging" can be downloaded for free.

Sky High Health Care Costs

Why does health care cost so much in the U.S.? Investigative journalists at ProPublica are tracking down the reasons. First stop - medical waste. According to ProPublica, a nurse outraged over what her hospital threw out started a business collecting hospital discards to send to poor hospitals in other parts of the world. She estimated that her warehouse contained about $20

million worth of health care equipment and supplies. Researchers at the University of California Medical Center estimated that the department of neurosurgery alone wasted nearly $3 million a year in supplies. The hospital wasted an average of $968 per neurosurgery case. These researchers then showed individual surgeons what their operating room cost was per patient compared with other surgeons in the hospital. Researchers offered surgical departments a bonus if they cut their costs by 5 percent. The surgeons who participated cut costs an average of 6.5 percent. Imagine how many people these cost savings could insure!

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