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Wellness Through Answers News

July/August 2019

*Linking Connecticut Patients, Families, and Residents to
Reliable Health Information*

New Name

The name "HealthNet" is no longer used by our library's consumer health information service. Our service is now called "Wellness Through Answers." To be consistent, we have renamed our newsletter, too. Although our name has changed, our focus remains the same: linking you to reliable health information.

Have a Personal Health Question?

Wellness Through Answers staff can help you find answers. Our medical librarians research personal health questions for Connecticut residents. Our service is free and confidential. Call or email us with your question: (860) 679-4055 / hnet@uchc.edu

A Night on the Town Without Alcohol

Imagine a fun evening out at a bar...that does not involve alcohol. People across the United States are now challenging each other to see what life is like without alcohol and are sharing their experience with others on Instagram accounts like "[Sober Girl Society](#)" and "[Sober Nation](#)." The [sober movement](#) also includes books like *Sober Curious*, *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*, and *Sober Diaries*, which celebrate the positive aspects of not drinking. These benefits include better sleep, weight loss, and discovering new activities. [Scientific research](#) supports these claims of enhanced well-being and also points to physiological changes like improved insulin sensitivity and healthier livers. Taking an alcohol break does not work for drinkers who have become alcohol dependent. There are a variety of treatments for alcohol dependency including counseling, medications, and support groups. Those seeking help for alcohol abuse can visit the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's "[Alcohol Treatment Navigator](#)." This internet resource reviews treatment options and helps visitors find high-quality care.

Cost a Barrier to HIV Prevention Treatment

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. Truvada is a drug that is [99% effective](#) at preventing HIV infection in high-risk populations. The drug's steep price ([\\$2,000 a month](#)) and other financial barriers, however, may be preventing many patients who need the drug from getting it.

Patients taking Truvada must follow a program that requires quarterly lab tests and physician visits. [Private insurance](#) plans may cover Truvada but have high copays, require coinsurance, or don't cover the lab tests and office visits. [State Medicaid](#) programs generally cover the drug and related services with the exception of some Southern states that did not expand Medicaid under the "Affordable Care Act."

Needy patients have some options. Truvada's manufacturer, Gilead, offers assistance programs that help cover the cost of the drug and copays. Physicians can enroll patients in clinical trials which pick up all costs. Patients can also look forward to a potentially cheaper [generic version](#) of Truvada in 2020.

Conserve Energy While Keeping Cool

When summer temperatures soar many of us turn on our air conditioners. You can conserve energy and save money with these low-cost or no-cost tips for keeping cool:

- Open your windows on cool nights rather than run the air conditioner
- Use ceiling or portable fans in place of air conditioners
- Locate your air conditioner in the shade - direct sunlight on a window air conditioner increases its workload
- Install an appliance timer to minimize running your air conditioner when you are not home.
- Consider awnings for windows in direct sunlight

Visit EnergizeCT.com for more energy-conserving ideas.

Common Drugs Have Dementia-Like Side Effects

Anticholinergics are a class of drugs used to treat a broad range of medical conditions including incontinence, allergies, sleep problems, and depression, and are found in both over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Some of the common side effects of anticholinergics, like confusion, disorientation, agitation, delirium, and severe changes in consciousness, are also symptoms of dementia. When physicians [see these behaviors](#) in older patients they may attribute them to aging or age-related illness rather than to drug side effects.

Older adults concerned about the side effects of anticholinergic drugs should ask their physicians about the benefits and risks of taking them, and whether safer alternatives might be available. Patients should work with their physicians to slowly wean themselves off anticholinergics to avoid withdrawal side effects.

Fear of Alzheimer's Disease Could Lead to Overtreatment

With [no cure for Alzheimer's disease](#) (AD), physicians are turning to preventive measures. A potential risk factor for AD is a high level of beta-amyloid. Patients with high levels of this protein, but without symptoms of mental decline, are being diagnosed with "preclinical AD" and prescribed drugs to reduce their risk of developing the disease. An estimated 30% of adults over age 50 [meet the criteria](#) for preclinical AD. [Most, however, will never develop dementia.](#) Furthermore, the drugs being prescribed have not been proven to prevent AD or slow mental decline. Attempts to prevent AD may mean that many people will be treated unnecessarily.

Few U.S. Hospitals Meet Volume Standards for High-Risk Surgeries

How many procedures a surgeon or hospital perform ("surgical volume") affects patient safety. Low surgical volumes can mean higher death rates, more complications, and [longer hospital stays](#), especially for high-risk surgeries. [Leapfrog](#) (a nonprofit that evaluates hospital safety and quality), used [minimum "volume standards"](#) to rate surgeon and hospital safety for eight high-risk procedures: weight-loss surgery; carotid endarterectomy; esophageal resection for cancer; lung resection for cancer; mitral valve repair and replacement; open abdominal aortic aneurysm repair; pancreatic resection for cancer; and rectal cancer surgery. [Few of the hospitals](#) Leapfrog surveyed met the minimum standards for all eight procedures, and rural hospitals performed far worse than urban hospitals. Leapfrog also reported that few hospitals have a process to prevent unnecessary high-risk procedures.

You can read Leapfrog's [report](#) on high-risk surgeries and review the [performance](#) of individual hospitals on the group's [website](#).

When Shopping for a Surgeon, Take Your Time!

Thinking about surgery? Take your time and research your options. Here are some tips to follow:

- Learn whether surgery is the best treatment for your condition. There may be less risky or more effective alternatives. A [medical librarian](#) can help you research your options.
- Get a second opinion. Choose a physician who is affiliated with a different hospital than the physician who recommended surgery.
- Find a surgeon and hospital specializing in the procedure.
- Interview your top candidates. Ask them about complications, recovery time, and whether there are minimally-invasive approaches. Minimally invasive surgeries use smaller incisions and usually have shorter recovery times.
- Look for red flags: surgeons who are eager to schedule you; surgeons who are rude; and surgeons who have accepted payments from drug or device manufacturers. Surgeons who mistreat their colleagues tend to have [more complications](#) and poorer outcomes. Surgeons with financial interests may recommend treatments, not in your best interest. The "[Dollars for Docs](#)" website and Medicare's "[Open Payments](#)" program list physician payments.
- Finally, pause to think things over before scheduling your procedure.

New Safety Standards for Geriatric Surgery

Adults over 65 make up **16%** of the U.S. population but account for over **40% of inpatient operations and 33% of outpatient operations**. These numbers are expected to grow as the U.S. population ages.

Older adults have different health care needs than younger adults and often have multiple chronic health conditions. They are also more likely to have additional problems like difficulty swallowing, malnutrition, or limited mobility, that could increase their risk for poor surgical outcomes. Given their shorter life expectancy, older adults may have different expectations for surgery than younger adults.

The American College of Surgeons has developed **standards** to improve the surgical care of older adults that focus on their special needs. The standards provide hospitals with recommendations to:

- Improve communications with patients
- Screen for conditions that may worsen surgical outcomes
- Manage medications better
- Provide geriatric-friendly rooms
- Ensure proper staffing

Living the Good Life on a Shoestring

Many of us think retirement means "pinching pennies." Can a frugal retirement be a happy one? Yes, and here's how you can make that happen:

- Identify the things in life that bring you joy or honor your values
- Agree that you will not spend money on things that are not on your "must-have list"
- Find creative ways to cut costs
- Volunteer your time and make friends
- Value experience over buying stuff

Next Avenue, a journalism site aimed at older adults, offers more **money-saving tips** from frugal, but happy retirees.

More Health News You Can Use:

Free [summer meals](#) for Connecticut kids

Feeling Lonely? Try having "[Tea with Strangers.](#)"

Presbyterian Church appoints its first "[Gun Violence Prevention Minister](#)"

Best [accessibility apps](#) for Android devices

[Smart pill bottle](#) tracks opioid prescriptions to prevent abuse

[Smart pills](#) alert physicians when patients miss oral chemotherapy dose

Make your own fruit and vegetable [wash](#)

Download [movie subtitles](#) for free

[Balance exercises](#) for people with walkers

[Smart speakers](#) warn of heart attacks

Coral-friendly [sunscreens](#)

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