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Wellness Through Answers News

January/February 2021

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

It's the start of a new year when we look for opportunities to change and grow. Hope should be abundant, but during this still raging pandemic, we have to work harder to find and embrace it. This issue of *Wellness Through Answers News* offers some suggestions for self-care, health enhancement, and strengthening our social connections. Happy reading!

Vaccine News

At least **one new variant of the COVID-causing virus** is raising alarms about the efficacy of current vaccines. Can current vaccines be fine-tuned to remain effective as the virus mutates? Here are some resources to answer your questions about COVID vaccines and encourage your community members to get vaccinated:

- CDC "**Communication Toolkits**" provide resources to promote vaccination
- UConn Pharmacy students create COVID-19 Vaccine **Information Series** in five languages
- *The New York Times* answers your COVID **vaccination questions**
- **Vaccine terms** explained

- Follow the [vaccine roll-out](#) by state, [nationally](#), and by [race/ethnicity](#)
- Should people with cancer, dementia, or autoimmune diseases [get vaccinated](#)?
- Beware of COVID [vaccine scams](#)
- How to [redesign COVID vaccines](#) to protect against variants
- [Myths surrounding](#) vaccine production and distribution

COVID-19 Updates

At the current rate of vaccination, it will take [seven years](#) for life to return to normal. Pandemic-weary Americans will have to continue to wear masks, disinfect, and practice social distancing. Here are some resources to help you stay vigilant and safe:

- State Coronavirus [hotlines](#)
- Masks now required for commuters using [public transportation](#)
- New NIH [COVID site](#) with information on vaccines, treatments, and NIH-funded research
- The Public Health Information Collaborative's "[Misinformation Alerts](#)" service debunks COVID-19 myths and ranks their seriousness
- A new COVID [risk-assessment tool](#) uses local conditions to predict the likelihood of getting infected when you venture out.
- Safety-rated [travel ideas](#) for spring break
- [Specialized clinics](#) for COVID long-haulers

Mask Up for Safety

The circulation of new, [more infectious variants](#) of the virus requires extra vigilance. Health officials now recommend doubling up or wearing two masks when you head out to crowded places like the grocery store. Double masking or layering masks decreases the likelihood that you will inhale or exhale virus particles. Doubling up your masks blocks [74-90% of infectious particles](#).

One way to double mask is to wear a disposable surgical mask under your tight-fitting cloth mask. Another recommended practice is to wear a tight-fitting cloth mask with a built-in pocket for a HEPA filter. If you don't have a HEPA filter, the filter from your vacuum cleaner bag will work.

KN95 masks remain the gold standard when it comes to respiratory protection. Although public health experts still advise against using KN95 masks, there are

two alternatives they now recommend - KF94 masks popular in Korea and Chinese-manufactured KN95s masks.

The KF94 is **as effective** as the KN95, and you can order it online. **KN95s masks** are easy to find online, but fake versions abound. If you are going to order a Chinese-made mask, choose one of the **masks approved under the FDA's Emergency Use Authorization program**. The CDC website has **guidance for spotting** counterfeit KN95 masks.

Self-Care Isn't Selfish

Pre-pandemic, I noticed a flyer on my yoga studio's community board reminding students to "Refill Your Cup." The flyer included little tear-off slips of paper with self-care tips like meditate, sleep, eat well, or my favorite - breathe. Unless we care for ourselves first, we will not have the energy or strength to be there for others. The *New York Times* began 2021 with a "7-Day Wellness Challenge." Day four of the challenge was titled: "**Why Self-Care Isn't Selfish**," and offered self-care advice from many wellness experts. Among their tips:

- Give the best hours of the day to yourself
- Choose a word or phrase that represents what you want to achieve this year and make it your mantra
- Create a respite plan
- Find ways to help others that let you feel good about yourself

Need to Relax? Let Nature Be Your Guide

Feeling stressed, anxious, depressed? Here's a bit of advice: spend more time in nature. Take a walk outdoors, watch the birds at your backyard feeder, or sit on a park bench and stare at the clouds. "Nature therapy" is an area scientists are researching to improve our mental and physical health. A slate of **recent studies show** experiencing nature has many health benefits like reducing headaches, lowering blood pressure, and decreasing chronic illness. You don't have to spend a lot of time outdoors to benefit. A **2019 study** of city dwellers found spending as little as 20 minutes outside a few times a week resulted in a significant drop in their stress hormone levels. Even viewing green space **from a window** or through a **virtual reality "lens"** can improve your health.

Don't Neglect Your Mental Health

COVID has **upended our lives** and hammered our emotional wellbeing. According to the latest Gallop *Health and Healthcare* survey, Americans rated their mental health at an all-time low. Fear of venturing out, quarantines, and a **shortage** of mental health professionals have led many to turn their smartphones into "pocket therapists." Mental health app popularity has skyrocketed. With **20,000 different apps** available, how can you find the one that's best for you? Here are two helpful resources that rate mental health apps.

The team at **One Mind PsyberGuide** reviews apps and rates them on credibility, user-experience, and transparency of privacy practices. Consumers can search for apps by condition or type of treatment, then filter their results by platform, audience, and cost. They can print results in a table format to allow for side-by-side comparisons.

The **MIND website** lets consumers search for apps based on 88 different filters, including features, functionality, cost, developer type, and conditions. Over 250 apps have detailed ratings based on the American Psychiatric Association's App Evaluation Model. MIND displays search results in a table or creates a shortlist based on the criteria consumers select.

Walk This Way

Walking is an easy way to become more active. Although walking seems simple, there are common mistakes that limit its health benefits. Here is a summary of walking don'ts:

- Overstriding - take short steps and remember to roll through and push off with your back foot
- Wearing the wrong shoes
- Walking flat-footed - make sure your shoes are flexible and that you roll through the step with your forward foot from the heel to toe
- Keeping your arms at your side or swinging them wildly- keep your elbows close to your body and swing your arms forward and backward
- Looking at the ground or leaning forward- keep your chin up and your eyes focused on the street ahead. An upright posture lets your lungs fill and avoids problems with your neck, shoulders, and back
- The wrong clothing- dress in layers, wear reflective gear, and don't forget your hat
- Not hydrating- remember to drink water before, during, and after you walk

You can find more information about walking mechanics, gear, and how to find a walking buddy on the fitness website "[verywellfit](#)."

First Monthly-Injectable Treatment Approved for HIV

In this terrible pandemic, it is hard to remember that there are other serious infectious diseases affecting millions of people around the world, like HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus.) In 2018 almost **40,000 people** in the US were newly diagnosed with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus.) Worldwide, almost **1.7 million people** were infected with HIV in 2019. In January, the Food and Drug Administration **approved** the first once-a-month injectable drug, Cabenuva (cabotegravir and rilpivirine injectable formulation.)

Why is this important? Cabenuva is the first long-acting treatment for HIV. The current standard treatment involves taking 1 - 3 antiretroviral pills every day. Medication compliance is key to keeping the virus at undetectable levels and preventing its spread. But, remembering to take their pills every day can be a challenge for some patients. Government data show that **7 out of 10 patients** take their pills every day. According to the drug maker's pivotal studies, 9 out of 10 patients claimed they preferred the monthly injection to daily pills.

Are there downsides to the new drug? Yes, the **wholesale price** of the injectable is close to \$4,000 per month. Side effects include injection site reactions, fever, fatigue, headache, musculoskeletal pain, nausea, sleep disruption, dizziness, and rash.

Fighting Ageism

Ageism or discrimination based on age is no more acceptable than any other form of prejudice. Ageism is often subtle like a physician describing an older adult patient as elderly rather than using their numeric age, or when a cashier or wait staff refers to an older adult customer as "sweetie" or "dear." Even a friend who jokes that your high-water pants are "grandpa pants" is practicing ageism. If you are over 50, comments like these aren't cute- they are offensive and hurtful. And just because a person is older does not mean they can't dress fashionably.

"**Old School**," an online clearinghouse for anti-ageism resources is on a mission to end age-based discrimination. The site is the brainchild of ageism activist, Ashton Applewhite. She coined the terms "olders" and "youngers" to describe

people by age. The word elderly **is** offensive, and there is no companion term (youngerly?) to describe anyone who is not older. Old School offers lots of vetted teaching tools and resources including books, videos, speakers, workshops, handouts, and curricula. Applewhite has also published an anti-ageism manifesto, *This Chair Rocks*. Perhaps it should be required reading in schools because like it or not, we all grow old.

Good Nutrition Is Key to Good Health

Good nutrition offers **benefits across our lifespan** by: supporting childhood growth and development; decreasing the likelihood of obesity and chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer; and increasing life expectancy. Some healthcare practitioners treat food as medicine and prescribe healthful foods to help patients with chronic diseases manage their conditions and avoid complications. William Li, MD, founder of the **Angiogenesis Foundation**, believes many foods can boost our immune systems and reinforce our lines-of-defense against diseases, including COVID-19. Dr. Li has been involved in **COVID-19 research** and observed a connection between diet and COVID outcomes. COVID patients who ate healthfully did better. He believes immune-boosting foods may be able to **rebuild blood vessels** damaged by the COVID virus.

How can you give your diet a tune-up? Your public library may own the food-as-medicine guides: *How Not to Die* by Michael Gregor or *Eat to Beat Disease* by William Li. The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services **food guidelines for Americans** include advice for customizing diets that embrace different cultures and their traditional diets. Another resource for traditional diets is **Oldways**. This Boston-based organization has created food pyramids, recipes, and brochures for the Mediterranean, African heritage, Latin American, Asian American, and Vegan/Vegetarian traditional diets. Their menus and recipes highlight regional produce, unprocessed foods, and cultural traditions.

Bringing up Taboo Topics with Your Doctor

Are you suffering from an embarrassing health condition? These free **booklets from NIH** can help you have a meaningful conversation with your doctor about conditions like memory loss, incontinence, and sexuality.

More News and Resources You Can Use

Five [yoga poses](#) for beginners

[Birding](#) for beginners

Destress with over 80 live animal cams on [Explore.org](#)

Big tech's [new products](#) to enhance accessibility

Ten [Zoom-free ways](#) to nurture friendships during the pandemic

How to [find and keep](#) new friends

Conservative, [effective treatment](#) options for chronic pain

Give a listen - *New York Times's* [classical music appreciation series](#), "5 Minutes That Will Make You Love ..."

Why facts don't [change minds](#)

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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

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