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Wellness Through Answers News

September/October 2021

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

Image by Fotoshautnah on Pixabay

October is Health Literacy Month

Health literacy is our ability to easily find, understand, and use health information and services to make decisions and take actions to improve our health and wellbeing. Almost everyone experiences low health literacy, whether it is due to language, disabilities, or understanding how the healthcare system works. Here are some health literacy resources to explore and share:

- National Institutes of Health's "[Clear Communication](#)" program - offers articles and videos that teach patients how to prepare for medical appointments, talk openly with their providers, and understand their diagnosis and treatment.
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality - "[Questions are the Answer](#)" program - offers tips and resources to use before, during, and after a medical appointment to ensure the best possible care. Resources include videos emphasizing how the right questions improve care, downloadable checklists, and a question-builder app.
- [MedlinePlus](#) - offers health information in multiple languages. Search by language or health topic.

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, "[Know the Science](#)" - this interactive program offers tools to help consumers understand complex scientific topics related to health research and make well-informed decisions about their health.
- "[Health and Wealth: A Graphic Guide to the US Healthcare System](#)" - the Center for Cartoon Studies produced this 32-page downloadable comic book aimed at demystifying our country's health care system. The guide covers a range of topics, including the earliest days of Medicare, a history of the hospital, and our convoluted billing process.

Vaccine News

- Pfizer vaccine is [90% effective](#) against all variants for at least six months
- [Side effects after booster](#) are similar to those after the second shot
- [Vaccination status](#) is the new must-have for resumes
- More than [7 in 10 adults](#) now report at least one dose of the COVID vaccine
- Latest vaccine [booster guidelines](#)
- FDA Advisory Committee to Meet October 14-15 to discuss [Moderna and J&J boosters](#)
- J&J says their booster is [94% effective](#) against severe COVID
- New study reports [reduced vaccine hesitancy](#)
- What is the law around [religious exemptions](#) to vaccine mandates?
- A quick guide to our countries patchwork of COVID [vaccine mandates](#)
- Consumers get a [new online tool](#) to check nursing home vaccine data

COVID-19 Updates

- When our public health [emergency should end](#) - experts weigh in
- [Six questions](#) to ask about air quality at work
- [Autoimmune response](#) found in many infected with COVID
- What do [crisis standards](#) of care mean?
- [Fauci recommends](#) indoor mask use and increased vaccination to prevent cold-weather COVID surge in the Northeast
- CDC [COVID Data Tracker](#) provides community-level data on transmission, deaths, hospitalizations, and vaccinations
- [Daily pill](#) to treat early COVID could be just months away
- Numerous drugs and supportive care advances [improve outcomes](#) for hospitalized COVID patients
- [Post-vax COVID](#) is a new disease
- SARS-CoV-2 [doppelganger viruses](#) found in bats in Laos

- Steep declines in **life expectancy** not seen since WWII
- Why do children **respond differently** to COVID
- New research shows **masks protect** against COVID
- Why are at-home rapid tests so **expensive** in the US?
- Over half of states **rolled back** public health pandemic powers
- Mask mandates and guidance for **schools**
- A **county-level guide** to COVID risks
- How to use over-the-counter **rapid antigen tests** effectively
- **Average hospital charge** for complex COVID stay- \$320,000

MRIs are Cost-effective for Detecting Cancers in Very Dense Breast Tissue

On a mammogram, non-dense breast tissue is dark and transparent. Dense breast tissue appears as a solid white area that is difficult to see through and can mask tumors. Breast **cancer risk increases** with breast density. Having extremely dense breast tissue almost **doubles the risk** of breast cancer. Ten percent of women have extremely dense breast tissue.

MRI screening is **more sensitive** than mammography for detecting tumors but is more expensive. A new **study** examined the costs and benefits of MRIs for women with extremely dense tissue, looking at rates of breast cancer diagnosis, death, and overdiagnosis in women 50 to 75 years old. The researchers recommended screening with MRI alone every four years or switching between mammography and MRI every two years.

Cost-effectiveness is one consideration insurers use to determine covered benefits. The researchers expect the cost of MRI screening to decrease as new technologies like artificial intelligence reduce the rate of false-positive diagnoses.

Counterfeit Pain Pills Drive Overdose Crisis

The US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) released a **public safety alert** about the dramatic increase in fake prescription drugs laced with dangerous levels of fentanyl and methamphetamine. The fake pills look like the prescription opioid medications Oxycontin, Percocet, Vicodin, and Xanax, and the stimulant Adderall. They are sold on the street by dealers or online through social media and e-commerce platforms.

The DEA has seized **9.5 million counterfeit pills** so far this year- more than the two previous years combined. Of the pills containing fentanyl, two out of every five contain a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl.

The US is struggling with an epidemic of drug overdoses. Overdose deaths in 2020 increased 30% from 2019 to a **historic high** of 93,000. Many of these deaths were linked to counterfeit pills containing fentanyl.

The DEA alert does not apply to opioid medications legitimately prescribed by physicians and dispensed by licensed pharmacists.

Doctors Deliver Good News to Many Breast and Lung Cancer Patients - No Chemotherapy

Genetic tests, targeted treatments, and immunotherapy are changing cancer management strategies. For decades, patients diagnosed with breast or lung cancer **automatically received chemotherapy**. Chemotherapy meant hair loss, nausea, fatigue, and possible damage to the heart and nerves of the hands and feet. Today doctors may recommend a gentler, shorter course of treatment with substantial increases in life expectancy.

Cheaper, faster gene sequencing made it easier for doctors to test breast tumors to see if they would respond to targeted drugs. These drugs attack cancer by binding to specific proteins on the surface of cancer cells. Genetic tests then look for proteins arrays on cancer cells to predict whether patients benefit from these drugs. There are **14 newly-approved targeted drugs** for breast cancer and many more in clinical trials.

Lung cancer patients are **living longer thanks to immunotherapy**. Although targeted drugs are available for lung cancer, patients stop responding to them over time. Immunotherapy uses drugs to help patients' immune systems fight cancer. Patients may receive immunotherapy alone or along with chemotherapy. Immunotherapy, when given for two years, **more than doubles a patient's life expectancy**.

While research supports using less or no chemotherapy, some cancer treatment facilities may not offer patients other options. Patients seeking a gentler cancer treatment plan can request a second opinion. The **National Comprehensive Cancer Treatment Network** offers step-by-step patient guides to treatments that provide the best results for breast, lung, and many other

types of cancer. The guides can help patients have productive conversations about treatment options with their doctors.

Making Pharmacy Services More Accessible

The chain store pharmacy's one-size-fits-all approach to service does not meet the needs of many customers with physical disabilities. Pandemic restrictions highlighted the difficulties people with vision, hearing, mobility, and cognitive impairments face when accessing health services. There are no national standards for drug label accessibility. [Pennsylvania](#), [Massachusetts](#), and [Maine](#) may require pharmacies to provide prescription labels in Braille, large print, high-contrast, and audio.

The start-up, [Accessible Pharmacy Services](#), is [making inroads towards removing the barriers](#) that prevent many patients from being compliant with their medical treatments. It launched in May 2020 and now [operates in 31 states](#) primarily, in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic. One of the company founders understands the challenges faced by people with disabilities because he is legally blind.

Accessible Pharmacy's concierge agents speak with patients by phone, coordinate refills, check with doctors for drug interactions, and consult with on-site pharmacists. Patients choose from Braille, large print, or audio labels, and there is free home delivery for prescriptions, medical devices, and over-the-counter medications. The company has a packaging advisory committee of blind adults and listen to their customers. Based on customer feedback, they added pet and guide-dog medications to their delivery menu.

Accessible Pharmacy plans to expand to all 50 states. Until then, there are free apps to help blind and vision-impaired patients:

- [Be My Eyes](#) - connects blind and low-vision people with sighted volunteers and company representatives for visual assistance through a live video call
- [Spoken Rx](#) - in-app prescription reader application developed by CVS
- [Live Caption](#) - provides real-time speech-to-text for live conversations
- [ScripTalk](#) - patients scan RFID labels on the prescription bottle to listen to the prescription information. Approximately [1800 Walmart and Sam's Club pharmacies](#) offer ScripTalk.

Expert panel recommends elimination of race in the assessment of kidney

disease

Black Americans are **four times more likely to have kidney failure** and are less likely to receive kidney transplants than white Americans. A race-based algorithm or diagnostic tool caused this discrepancy. A National Kidney Foundation (NKF)/American Society of Nephrology (ASN) **Task Force now recommends** against the use of race to assess kidney disease.

In the 1990s, **scientists modified the equation** that measures kidney function to include creatine, a byproduct of muscle metabolism. Black patients had higher levels of creatine. Researchers felt the addition of this blood marker would increase the accuracy of kidney function estimates. Instead, this race-corrected formula resulted in underestimates of kidney function for Black patients. Critics of the equation blamed its inaccuracy on flawed race reporting and weak creatine research studies.

Creatine tests are useful for screening, but doctors who need more information about kidney function should test for cystatin C. The blood marker Cystatin C is **a better diagnostic tool** and is much **more accurate in Black patients**.

A **calculator** on the NKF website allows patients to check their kidney function under the latest equation. Many Black patients may discover themselves moved into an advanced stage of disease eligible for a kidney transplant.

Preservation of Indigenous Languages is Essential to Drug Discovery

What do aspirin, the diabetes drug metformin, and many commonly used chemotherapy drugs have in common? They are all derived from plants. **Forty percent of medications** sold in US pharmacies today come from plants. One avenue for drug discovering is the study of indigenous cultures.

In biodiverse regions like the Amazon, New Guinea, and North America, native peoples have developed a sophisticated knowledge of plant species and their medicinal uses. Plant-based remedies are not written down but are shared orally. Knowledge of plants, like other cultural traditions, becomes encoded in native languages. When native people abandon their language, they lose their biocultural heritage. **A new study** of native peoples in biodiverse regions found most medicinal uses of plants were unique to a single indigenous language. Native groups speaking different languages did not share their plant-based remedies.

Worldwide, [40% of spoken languages](#) are under threat. Indigenous languages are particularly vulnerable because many are not taught at school or used in public. UNESCO declared 2022-2032 as the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages* to inspire action. The declaration maintains education in their mother tongue and participation in public life using their native language are essential for the survival of indigenous languages. They also recommend digital technologies to support the use and preservation of threatened languages.

More News and Resources You Can Use

- [Healthy pumpkin spice pancakes](#)
- [Exercise](#) to ward off cognitive effects of chemotherapy
- How to know when it's time to [stop driving](#)
- A tiny Mexican village [builds homes](#) with 3D printers
- How to pack a "go bag" for climate disasters
- The critical [time window](#) for rehabilitation after a stroke
- Prenatal exposure to [acetaminophen](#) may alter fetal development
- Apple's iOS 15 phone has a feature that measures [fall risk](#)
- [Reflective street paint](#) reduces temperatures in urban neighborhoods
- [Early Intervention Improves Autism Symptoms Before School Age](#)
- [Wheelchair etiquette](#)
- How to [recognize RSV](#)
- [Posterior vitreous detachment \(PVD\)](#) - a serious but unfamiliar eye problem associated with aging
- The [Nipah Virus](#) - the next pandemic nightmare?
- Mindfulness meditation and other techniques to [reduce worrying](#)

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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