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New year, new project

By Stuart Rosenthal, Publisher

I don’t know about you, but I frequently find my New Year’s resolutions generate a sense of déjà vu. There are just some things about me that I want to improve, or tasks I’d like to accomplish, that hang around from year to year.

A friend who knew I like to keep notepaper in my front pocket (so I can incessantly write down or remind myself of things I need to do) once made me burst out laughing when he suggested I write a to-do list of things I’ve already done! THAT was a suggestion I could get into.

Well, that’s sort of what I’m doing this year. In the last few weeks, I’ve finally accomplished (well, started) something that I’ve long aimed for, and I’m going to call it my New Year’s resolution anyway.

As you may recall from earlier columns, last spring I took a seven-week “sabbatical” from Fifty Plus to test drive my “retirement plan” — composing original piano pieces. That’s something I used to do in middle school and high school and always loved.

Doodling around on the piano (which I studied for 12 years) and coming up with interesting note combinations and rhythms were things that made me look forward to my daily piano practice as a kid.

So, in May and June I pulled out some of the short pieces, themes and sketches I wrote down as a youth and worked on developing them into compositions of a respectable length (we’re talking 3 to 5 minutes).

I produced three new pieces and reacquainted myself with two from high school that my friends and family tell me are nice to listen to. I also learned how to use music notation software so I could make sheet music for the pieces.

That checked off a couple of resolutions I’ve been making, or thinking of making, for years. (It also convinced me that my retirement plan of pursuing my passion for music is a good one.)

It also brings me to this year’s already-begun resolution — to share my music with the world. I have been recording those five pieces and making videos of my self playing them.

And just the other day, I set up a YouTube channel (Stuart’s Melodies), website (stuartsmelodies.com) and, heaven help me, registered for my first Facebook page. I’m also getting ready to contact a music distribution company about putting my audio tracks on Spotify, Apple Music and the like.

I don’t know how many people make “join the world of social media” (or really “become an exhibitionist”) one of their New Year’s resolutions, but that’s basically what I’m doing.

So, is this what the world’s been waiting for? Will millions beat a path to my door?

You tell me. It would certainly be a big kick to have you listen to my pieces and perhaps download them and/or the sheet music.

Learning that a Fifty Plus reader somewhere has decided to play one of my pieces would be especially gratifying.

Two pieces are there as I write this; the other three are in process and should be up in the next few weeks. You can download the recordings and sheet music at no charge from my website. There is an option on the site to pay whatever you want for downloads, but payment is optional.

I fervently hope to write and post more pieces in the future. (You can sign up on the website to be notified when new works are added.)

I couldn’t have done this without the help of others, so I want to thank Fifty Plus staff (especially Margaret Foster, Roger King and Gordon Hasenei) for taking over my duties last spring during my sabbatical, Jon Seipp (audio engineer extraordinaire) for recording my pieces, my friend and indefatigable videographer and video editor David Hughes, and music and software mentor Jason Sherwin (a composer of note, by the way).

I hope you will check out my music in one way or another.

A few of my videos are also now available at the Beacon Virtual 30+Expo, which I encourage you to visit even more for the wonderful speakers and classes, and for the useful information provided by dozens of exhibitors. That’s all available free online through January 31 at beacon30expo.com.

Thanks for listening! Feel free to send me an email via stuartsmelodies.com or to post comments on YouTube or Facebook. I look forward to hearing from you.

The entire Fifty Plus staff joins me in wishing you a happy, healthy, peaceful and meaningful 2022.

Stuart Rosenthal,
Publisher, Fifty Plus

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Letters to the editor

Readers are encouraged to share their opinion on any matter addressed in Fifty Plus as well as on political and social issues of the day.

Mail your Letter to the Editor to Fifty Plus, P.O. Box 2227, Silver Spring, MD 20915, or email to info@fiftyplusrichmond.com. Please include your name, address and telephone number for verification.

Dear Editor:

The November edition of your newspaper arrived this week, and I must say, I was really impressed. First, reading about all the awards the newspaper has won this year. What a wide range of interests and information you’ve introduced to your readers!

Then, in this particular issue, the number of informative stories regarding flu shots and stem cell clinics and palliative care. That story went well in combination with the work you did on my piece [November’s cover story, “What’s next for Diane Rehm?”], presenting another option with which to view end-of-life care. Good work and good reading all!

Please continue to send me your newspaper. I know it will add to my reading pleasure.

Diane Rehm,
Washington, DC

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Volunteers help make homes accessible

By Glenda C. Booth

On one of the hottest days of 2021, Chesterfield resident Susan Stephenson, who uses a wheelchair, was buoyed by the sight of 24 volunteers in her front yard. Despite the weather, which she said was “hotter than blue blazes,” a crew from the nonprofit RampsRVA arrived with tools, dismantled her broken wheelchair ramp and installed a new one. One volunteer even mowed her lawn.

“One person had a job and I never heard one complaint about the heat,” Stephenson said. “It was a very emotional day.”

The ramp “is a godsend,” said Stephenson, who can now go outside for fresh air and to talk with neighbors. “It’s my legs and my independence.”

RampsRVA installs free modular wheelchair ramps for homes in Richmond and Henrico and Chesterfield counties. With a ramp, people can more easily get to their mailbox, medical appointments, church and other places and reconnect with friends and their community.

One recipient, a woman who had been confined at home for a year, rode jubilantly around the neighborhood in her wheelchair after RampsRVA installed her ramp.

“Seeing someone coming down a ramp the first time brings tears to the eyes — to the person in the wheelchair, to the family, and to the volunteers who built it,” said Scott Kocen, executive director of RampsRVA.

No cost to recipients

RampsRVA got its start in 2005 when school officials at Collegiate School, a non-denominational private school in Richmond, asked students to develop a philanthropic project in their community.

Three students, Mike Down, Coleman Wortham and Gray Fain, came up with the idea of providing ramps to those in need of one. That led to the creation of the nonprofit, whose logo reads: RAMPS — Ramp Access Made Possible by Students.

The group’s mission proved so valuable and popular that more than 300 students involved in clubs at seven area high schools now assist the nonprofit.

They are joined by retired older adults and volunteers from companies like Dominion Energy and Burns and McDonnell, an engineering firm. The organization also partners with Senior Connections and the Richmond Housing Authority.

With the help of more than 1,500 volunteers, RampsRVA has built almost 600 ramps since that first year, at no cost to the recipients. A six- to eight-member team can typically build a ramp and attach it to a house in three hours.

However, wait time for a ramp can be several months to a year. For each ramp the organization builds, three more requests come in.

While installing modular structures is easier than building from scratch, putting in a ramp “is a science,” Kocen said, explaining that crew members have to measure to the inch, even the screws and bolts. The group also refurbishes used ramps.

The ramps, which cost the organization $3,000 each, are modular, which means they arrive in sections and must be put together. They are all steel, permeable and recyclable, and meet Americans with Disability Act (ADA) guidelines.

Product changes lives

Some ramp recipients have been isolated at home. Many have degenerative conditions like arthritis, diabetes or respiratory illnesses. Some people, including those undergoing rehabilitation in a nursing home, cannot be discharged to return home until they get a ramp installed.

These metal structures help caregivers, too, who otherwise would have to carry the disabled person and a wheelchair up and down stairs. “It’s for the entire household,” Kocen said.

There are also rewards for the 40 to 50 volunteers who build four to five ramps a month. They can immediately see and take pride in their work, and share the joy so obvious in people and their families. Volunteers get their hands dirty and feel they have made an impact, Kocen said.

One volunteer, Jim Down, retired in 2005 from marketing supermarket products and did not want to sit in front of the television all day. Since then, he has helped install more than 100 ramps.

His son, Mike, was one of the group’s original student founders. Now the senior Down is president and chairman of the board of directors of RampsRVA.

Down believes that what inspires volunteers and keeps bringing them back are “three equities” — financial equity thanks to fundraising (so ramps are free to recipients), physical equity from joining together to build the ramps, and emotional equity when they see what the ramp means to the recipient.

Stephenson, who uses her ramp every day, is very grateful. “RampsRVA is an amazing organization,” she said. “They change lives.”

Cover Story
Eating healthy? A diet can be ‘too clean’

By Matthew Kadey

We’ve all heard the term “clean eating” and how it’s supposed to give us picture-perfect health. For good health, there is obviously nothing wrong with striving to eat fewer processed foods and cooking from scratch more often.

But for some people, the quest to clean up their diet can veer into a problematic preoccupation with what they are putting up their diet can veer into a problematic preoccupation with what they are putting up their diet can veer into a problematic preoccupation with what they are putting up their diet can veer into a problematic preoccupation with what they are putting up their diet can veer into a problematic preoccupation with what they are putting up.

For example, someone may eat only grass-fed, organic, non-GMO, low-carb, low-sodium and non-dairy foods. If they deem the food available to be unhealthy, they may forgo eating.

Eliminating food groups is a common problem with orthorexia. And this can leave someone unknowingly setting themselves up for nutritional deficiencies. Over time, nutritional shortfalls can adversely affect cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, neurological and endocrine health.

Mental health issues can arise

While an individual begins with good intentions, over time this unhealthy fixation on spick-and-span eating can have unintended physical and psychological consequences.

“Avoiding parties and eating at restaurants with friends and family because you are worried about the healthfulness of the food available can leave you being socially isolated,” Conason said.

A clean eating obsession can also cause someone to be preachy about diet and judgmental toward those who don’t follow their narrow definition of healthful eating, sometimes leading to strained relations with friends and loved ones.

Conason cautions that, when self-esteem is so strongly intertwined with food choices, depression, self-hating and anxiety can become common mental health outcomes of orthorexia.

While orthorexia doesn’t have an official psychiatric diagnosis like other eating disorders such as bulimia, Conason notes that it’s gaining recognition as a form of disordered eating in the field.

While there is a lack of hard science regarding the prevalence of orthorexia, many experts believe that cases have been steadily rising among both women and men.

Social media and ads promote

The rise of social media likely has played a role. Seeing people you follow flaunting their green smoothies and Buddha bowls as part of restrictive diets can leave you feeling inadequate when dinner ends up being takeout pizza.

A report in the journal Eating and

—AP
Too clean
From page 4
Weight Disorders suggests that people who have an Instagram feed dominated by imagery of beautiful, clean foods are at a greater risk for obsessive eating patterns, including orthorexia.

“These outlets can elicit comparisons where you think you need to eat like the people you follow to look like them,” Conason said.

Notably, research also suggests that orthorexia may not carry the stigma of other eating disorders, such as anorexia and binge-eating. That means the condition can hide in plain sight, under the guise of healthy eating and good health.

In the end, if someone suspects clean eating food rules have gotten in the way of gleaming any joy out of life, it’s probably time to talk to someone.

“Speak to a licensed therapist who specializes in eating disorders or seek help at an eating disorder treatment center,” Conason recommended.

Soon a person may once again fret a lot less when enjoying a slice of chocolate cake with friends and family.

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Our guts and brains connect many ways

By Carrie Dennett

Traditionally, Western science has treated the mind and the body as separate entities. But the flood of research on gut microbiota, and our understanding of the role our body’s microbes play in physical health, is also having an impact on how we understand mental and cognitive health. The research has also increased interest in learning how nurturing a diverse gut microbiota can help us be both healthier and happier.

Scientists have known for years about the gut-brain axis, the two-way communication between the central nervous system (CNS) and the enteric nervous system (ENS). The CNS has about 100 billion neurons (nerve cells) that communicate with other neurons. The ENS, which covers the entire gastrointestinal tract, has about 500 million neurons, so the gut-brain axis links your brain’s emotional and cognitive centers with your intestinal functions.

The vagus nerve is one of the biggest nerves connecting your gut and your brain, also sending signals in both directions. This two-way connection is clear when we become aware of digestive pain or distress, when we have “a gut feeling,” or when stress or anger causes our stomach to “be tied up in knots.”

A more recent twist in our knowledge of the gut-brain connection is the concept of a microbiome-gut-brain axis. Research suggests that our gut microbes interact directly not just with our intestinal cells and the ENS, but also with the CNS.

Diet linked to anxiety, depression

Both human and animal studies have demonstrated that consuming probiotics (beneficial microbes) from supplements or food can reduce inflammation, anxiety and signs of distress.

A 2013 study randomized 36 healthy women to one of three groups: probiotic yogurt, non-fermented milk product with no probiotics, or no yogurt or milk products. After four weeks of twice-daily consumption, brain scans indicated that the women who ate the probiotic-rich yogurt had less of a negative emotional response when shown photos of people who were angry, sad or fearful.

Prebiotic fiber, which feeds gut bacteria, may also influence mental health. Research from the Women’s Health Initiative found that a diet high in refined carbohydrates increased the risk of depression in postmenopausal women. That study found that a diet high in fiber from whole grains, vegetables and whole fruit was associated with a lower risk of depression.

Many people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which is now considered to be a disorder of the gut-brain interaction, also have increased levels of anxiety and depression symptoms, and about 60% of IBS sufferers report that their first symptoms coincided with increased stress levels.

Many people with IBS experience “visceral hypersensitivity” — in other words, their perception of pain or discomfort in the intestines is more heightened than normal. People with severe IBS symptoms are likely to exhibit alterations to their gut microbiota, whereas people with mild symptoms are not.

Microbial diversity and brain health

Normal development of the gut microbiota is necessary to support normal brain development shortly after birth and may have long-lasting effects on behavior and cognitive function. There is growing evidence that the origins of schizophrenia and other psychiatric illnesses may lie in early brain development.

A sparse microbiota early in life may be associated with an increased risk of anxiety, autism and IBS, while a sparse microbiota later in life is associated with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease.

It is also noteworthy that an altered gut microbiome likely plays a central role in the onset of celiac disease, which can produce neurological symptoms such as loss of coordination, headache and cognitive dysfunction.

The microbiota can also trigger production of several neurotransmitters, including serotonin, 95% of which is produced in the gut. Bacteria in the large intestine ferment dietary fiber to produce short-chain fatty acids, which may improve cognitive function in various neurological diseases.

More research needed

Research supports the role of gut bacteria in brain development and function, but most of this research has been done on animals. Information from human studies is limited for several reasons, including the increased complexity of studying the human microbiome, broader variations in the human diet, environmental influences, genetic variation, and the difficulty of measuring subtle changes in human emotional and cognitive function.

More research needs to be done to understand the microbiota-gut-brain axis so that scientists can develop therapeutic strategies.

Despite the interest in probiotics, it’s not yet clear how specific strains of bacteria or combinations of strains might be used therapeutically to target certain health conditions or neurological issues.

Until then, a diet rich in whole plant foods, with the addition of probiotic-rich fermented foods, is a good bet for supporting both physical and mental health.

The bottom line is that our diets do influence the composition and health of our gut microbiota, and eating a diet rich in different types and sources of fiber will help support healthy microbial diversity.

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Strategies to stop sugar cravings now

I feel like in winter I go into hibernation mode: I put on weight and just crawl into bed earlier than I should.

Do you feel that way when it gets dark at 5 p.m.? Do you want to eat whenever you watch the news or a scary movie? It happens to all of us; you’re not alone.

If your cravings have increased due to going overboard on holiday treats, or even from stress and the current early darkness of winter, then read on because I have some simple, natural solutions that you can try. And I want to emphasize that this is very important to your immune system.

Curb the crave and start today. Trying the following five things is the first and only commitment you have to make today. You can always revise the plan, have a little donut, and then get back on track!

1. Drink something instead.

Take notice of how many times you go to the fridge and open the door.

The next time you do that, open the freezer instead and get some ice cubes. Put them in a glass of water, or iced tea, and drink instead of eating! This also hydrates you and reduces your risk of headache.

2. Add cinnamon.

Cinnamon has a well-known ability to help your insulin and blood sugar levels, which in turn, reduces cravings. Sprinkle it on some green apple slices, sweet potatoes, Greek yogurt or coffee.


This is a hard one, but you can do it. If you eat a lot of bread, rolls or buns, please reduce that. These are lacking in fiber, and they provide empty calories that spike your blood sugar, which then later crashes.

I suddenly see in my mind’s eye a mouth-watering foot-long sub, but that is a heavy carb hit for me.

4. Try gymnema sylvestre.

This plant has been studied extensively and is able to help support regeneration of pancreatic cells that have the job of lowering your blood sugar. The more of those pancreatic islet cells the better, and unfortunately, those get destroyed sometimes for people with an autoimmune condition.

5. Take a whiff of peppermint.

Peppermint is known to reduce cravings. You could drink some herbal peppermint tea with your meal (or right before) and see if that helps you to reduce portions. Also, you could sniff the essential oil. I have the same love of sugar as you. We would die without consuming some type of glucose, but that is different from consuming carbs and sugar all day.

I have a longer, extended version of this article, which you can receive by subscribing to my free newsletter at suzycohen.com.

This information is opinion only. It is not intended to treat, cure or diagnose your condition. Consult with your doctor before using any new drug or supplement.

Suzy Cohen is a registered pharmacist and author of The 24-Hour Pharmacist and Real Solutions from Head to Toe.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Feb. 18+

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR MUSEUM SYMPOSIUM

The annual American Civil War Museum Symposium will be held in Richmond at Historic Tredegar. Events will take place Fri., Feb. 18 from 5:30 to 7 p.m. and Sat., Feb. 19 from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tickets cost $56.20 for members, $81.20 for nonmembers, and $31.20 for teachers. For more information, visit bit.ly/SymposiumCivilWar.

Jan. 26

ONLINE CAREER SUMMIT

Trying to find a new job in the new year? Attend an online career summit hosted by AARP on Wed., Jan. 26 from 1 to 4 p.m. To learn more and register, visit bit.ly/VirtualCareerSummit. Email aarpprograms@aarp.org with questions.

Jan. 27

ARCHAEOLOGY SYMPOSIUM

The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History presents a free virtual panel discussion with six archaeologists who have disabilities. The symposium, titled Accessing Archaeology: A Conversation on Equity and Ethics, takes place Thurs., Jan. 27 from 12 to 1:30 p.m. For more information or to register, visit s.si.edu/3qtazOn.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Jan. 18

ALTERNATIVE VITAL RECORDS

Learn how to use alternative vital records to discover your family’s history. This workshop, presented by the Mount Vernon Genealogical Society, takes place via Zoom on Tues., Jan. 18 from 1 to 3 p.m. Members will receive an email with registration instructions before the meeting. Nonmembers can attend one free meeting each year and should email contactus@mvgenealogy.org to register. For more information, visit bit.ly/MVGSRecords.
Frozen vegetables, fruit are good choices

By Matthew Kadey

Nearly every health expert will be quick to tell you that it’s a good idea to load up your shopping cart with more vegetables and fruits. Their unique nutritional stew of fiber, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals is key to lasting health.

But sometimes fresh options in the produce aisle don’t look so fresh and are expensive, especially when out of season locally.

That’s when it’s time to head to the frozen food department for the unsung superhero of the supermarket.

There’s a common misconception that frozen fruits and veggies are not as healthy as their fresh counterparts, but New York City dietitian Deborah Malkoff-Cohen said this is not necessarily true.

“Fruits and vegetables are picked when they are at their peak ripeness and flash-frozen to retain all of their nutrients, antioxidants and flavor,” she said. And this occurs shortly after harvesting, so think of the produce fated for long-haul shipping. These are generally picked before ripe and, in turn, fall short of their full nutritious and flavor potential. Plus, long-haul transport from farm to fork and lengthy storage times can further degrade nutrition and taste.

To this point, an analysis of frozen and fresh-stored fruits and vegetables published in the Journal of Food Composition and Analysis found that in many cases, items like broccoli, green beans, corn and blueberries retained higher levels of vitamin C, beta-carotene and folate when in frozen form compared to fresh, as these nutrients are diminished during days of refrigerator storage.

Cup for cup, Malkoff-Cohen called out frozen spinach for having notably higher amounts of fiber, iron, folate and calcium than its fresh counterpart.

Overall, a study in the journal Nutrients shows that people who sneak more frozen fruits and vegetables into their diets take in higher amounts of must-have nutrients like fiber, calcium and potassium.

Still, Malkoff-Cohen recommended opting for fresh produce when it is in season, especially if items are locally grown or come from a nearby farm stand. “For some dishes like stir-fries and salads, sometimes you just want the crunchy texture of fresh.”

Easy way to eat healthy

Busy schedules can make it a challenge to prep and cook fresh produce all of the time. Buying frozen veggies and fruit — which are often already chopped, pitted or peeled — can make healthy eating more convenient.

Simply toss a few cups of frozen broccoli into a soup, stir some cherries into oatmeal, toss shelled corn into a bean salad, and whip up a smoothie with frozen mango.

With a quick heat in the microwave, pre-chopped frozen vegetable mixes can be your answer to an ultra-quick side-dish.

“The variety of fruits and vegetables you eat can increase tremendously when you add in frozen types,” said Malkoff-Cohen. And that is a pathway to eating a more nutritionally diverse diet.

Boiling can reduce nutrients

But preparation matters when it comes to the nutrition on your plate. Boiling runs destructive cooking methods.

Malkoff-Cohen suggested steaming, microwaving, roasting and stir-frying as less destructive cooking methods.

If you’re looking to cut back on food waste and its added cost to you and the environment, by buying frozen you don’t have to worry about eating your raspberries before white fuzz takes over. Space permitting, you can buy a lot more frozen veggies and fruits well in advance and use them in the weeks to come.

And these days there are more exciting options than ever, ranging from deep freeze dragon fruit to jazz up your next smoothie to frozen cauliflower “rice” that replaces a starch with a low-calorie veggie.

Securing your frozen assets

Choose bags of frozen fruits and vegetables where you can feel the individual contents. A bag that feels like a block of ice has been partially thawed and refrozen, which degrades quality.

Steer clear of frozen fruits and vegetables with added sweeteners, salt or mysterious sauces. “You just want to see fruits or vegetables in the ingredient list,” Malkoff-Cohen said.

Stored in a zero-degree freezer, frozen fruits and vegetables have a shelf-life of about one year before their flavor, texture and nutrients suffer. Once the food has been opened, store extras in an air-tight bag so they don’t get freezer burn.

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Swallowing, nerve pain issues addressed

By Howard LeWine, M.D.

Q: I recently began having a problem swallowing foods. What could this be? It is really starting to bother me.

A: Swallowing difficulty (doctors call it dysphagia) can happen for a variety of reasons. It is not always caused by a serious medical problem, but it is always a problem that needs to be sorted out.

Dysphagia is an urgent problem if you are losing weight or if you are coughing or choking after eating. If that’s the case, call your doctor immediately.

Sometimes swallowing difficulty can be a side effect of a medicine. Several medications (particularly those used to treat psychiatric symptoms) can interfere with your mouth and throat muscle coordination.

Some medicines also cause significant dryness of the mouth, which can contribute to swallowing difficulty.

This symptom could also come from inflammation or scarring (also called a stricture) in the esophagus. These problems usually come from acid reflux or from pills that are causing irritation in the esophagus.

A stroke, Parkinson’s disease or other less common neurologic illnesses that affect the function of muscles or nerves can also cause swallowing problems.

Sometimes a feeling of a lump in the throat can interfere with swallowing. This can happen if you have acid reflux, but it may also be a symptom of anxiety. (It’s possible for a lump to be caused by cancer, but that’s very unlikely without other symptoms.)

You should schedule a visit with your doctor so that all of these possibilities can be considered. Tests that your healthcare provider might recommend include:

— A video swallowing study. This test uses an X-ray technique called fluoroscopy to videotape your swallowing while you consume samples of foods or drink.

— Esophagastroduodenoscopy (EGD). EGD allows your doctor to view the esophagus, stomach and duodenum (the first part of the small intestine). For the test, a camera on a flexible, narrow cord is inserted down your throat.

— Barium swallow. For this X-ray test, you swallow a liquid that shows up on X-rays, so your doctor can view your esophagus.

— Laryngoscopy. This test allows your doctor to see your larynx. For the test, a camera on a flexible, narrow rod is inserted into your nose or mouth.

Q: I have persistent pain on the left side of my body just below my rib cage. It feels like it starts in the back and wraps around to the front.

I had an abdominal CT scan, which didn’t show anything that might cause the pain. What else might cause this and what can be done about it?

A: What you describe is actually quite common. It sounds like your pain might be coming from one of the nerves leaving the spine.

These spinal nerves wrap around from the center of your back to the sides of your body. Doctors call this type of nerve pain radiculopathy, or spinal nerve root pain.

The pain can be very severe. In addition, nerve pain often has a very irritating quality that can be even more uncomfortable than pain due to other causes.

Treating persistent nerve pain can be frustrating. There is no best approach. Finding the right therapies and medications to control persistent pain is a process of trial and error.

The goal is to find the most effective combination with the least amount of side effects. You might want to work with a medical team that includes a pain specialist and a physical therapist.

Swallowing, nerve pain issues addressed
Understanding and reducing stroke risk

By Family Features

Strokes, the second-leading cause of death globally, affect millions of people each year. A stroke can cause lasting disability and unimaginable pain for those impacted and their loved ones.

This year, 14.5 million people globally will have a stroke and 5.5 million people will die as a result, according to the World Stroke Organization.

Learn how to reduce your risk for stroke, how to identify the signs and symptoms, and why timely response and treatment are critical.

What raises risk?

A stroke occurs when a blood vessel that carries oxygen and nutrients to the brain is either blocked by a clot (ischemic stroke) or bursts (hemorrhagic stroke). When either of these happen, part of the brain cannot get the blood and oxygen it needs, causing brain cells to die.

While strokes can be devastating and deadly, up to 90% are preventable. By managing conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and atrial fibrillation (AFib); ceasing smoking; eating a healthy diet; getting regular exercise; and taking all prescribed medications, you can decrease your risk.

Treating AFib, an irregular heart rhythm disorder, is particularly important, as it is associated with a five-fold increased risk of ischemic stroke.

Signs and symptoms

When a stroke occurs, acting F.A.S.T. can help you get timely treatment needed to survive. That is to say, if you recognize the signs and symptoms of a stroke — Face weakness, Arm weakness and Speech slurring — it’s Time to call for help.

While F.A.S.T. is a commonly used acronym to identify the signs of stroke, it is important to understand the relationship between a stroke and the time it takes to receive care.

Time is of the essence

When brain cells die, brain function is lost. In fact, 1.9 million brain cells are lost every minute someone is having a stroke. Quickly identifying signs of a stroke and seeking immediate treatment can save your life or reduce long-term disability. Reducing the amount of time between the onset of stroke and treatment can make a difference in how well your brain, arms, legs, speech and thinking are able to recover.

“Stroke can be a deadly and devastating neurological event,” said Mark Dickinson, worldwide president of Cerenovus, a division of Johnson & Johnson that offers a broad portfolio of devices used in the endovascular treatment of stroke. [Ed Note: Cerenovus sponsored this article.]

“Yet when care and treatment is sought in a timely way, the chances of survival and recovery can increase significantly,” Dickinson said.

Treatment options

Seeking treatment for stroke immediately means you have more treatment options available to you, such as being eligible to receive tissue plasminogen activator or mechanical thrombectomy (MT) for ischemic stroke, the most common type of stroke. MT, a minimally invasive blood clot retrieval procedure, helps improve the chances you’ll survive an ischemic stroke and make a full recovery.

Treatment options for hemorrhagic stroke include surgery to remove, repair or clip a ruptured aneurysm.

To learn more about stroke, or find a doctor near you, visit bit.ly/strokestroke.
Healthy diet, lifestyle can prevent strokes

By Densie Webb

Studies show you can reduce your stroke risk by 80% by eating a healthful diet and making healthy lifestyle changes.

The risk for stroke increases with age, the incidence doubling with each decade after the age of 45. More than 70% of all strokes occur after the age of 65. Making healthy choices becomes even more important with each year that passes.

In the U.S. Health Professionals study and the Nurses’ Health Study, poor lifestyle choices accounted for more than half of all strokes.

Study participants who adhered to the five pillars of stroke prevention — did not smoke, had a body mass index of less than 25, took part in at least 30 minutes a day of moderate activity, consumed alcohol in moderation or not at all, and scored within the top 40% of a healthy diet score — had an 80% lower risk of stroke compared with participants who followed none of those healthy diet and lifestyle measures.

An analysis of 13 studies found that following a Mediterranean-style diet alone — characterized by high amounts of olive oil, nuts, fruits, vegetables and cereal; moderate amounts of fish and poultry; low consumption of dairy products, red and processed meat, and sweets; and low to moderate consumption of wine — was associated with a 30% reduced risk of having a stroke.

Diet can reduce the risk of stroke in a variety of ways, including helping to lower blood pressure, lowering blood cholesterol and triglycerides (compounds that may clog arteries), preventing blood clots from forming, reducing inflammation, helping to regulate blood sugar, increasing the “good” bacteria in the colon, and aiding in weight management.

Diet is a critical part of stroke prevention, regardless of age. Pairing a healthy and balanced diet with the four other pillars of stroke prevention can significantly reduce your risk and protect your health against other disease conditions as well.

According to the American Stroke Association, one in four stroke survivors will have a second stroke. Because the risk of having a second stroke is high, following a healthy diet and lifestyle is the best approach for protecting your future health.

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Q & A
From page 9

Effects, while keeping costs low.

When cost is an issue, I usually suggest a combination of a generic nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) and a low dose of one of the tricyclic antidepressants, such as amitriptyline.

If you cannot take NSAIDs because of an allergy, kidney problems, gastritis or peptic ulcer disease, generic acetaminophen can also be combined with a tricyclic.

Of the NSAIDs, naproxen tends to be my first choice for chronic pain because you only need to take it twice per day. Ibuprofen is just as effective.

When I prescribe a tricyclic antidepressant for pain, patients often tell me, “But I’m not depressed.” Today, tricyclics are used more for treatment of chronic pain, especially persistent nerve pain. Examples include amitriptyline, nortriptyline, desipramine and doxepin.

I recommend starting with a very low dose, such as 10 milligrams of amitriptyline at night. These drugs can be very sedating, so increase the dose gradually.

Unlike NSAIDs and acetaminophen, you won’t get the pain relief right away from the tricyclic. It may take a few weeks to work.

You can also try topical lidocaine or capsaicin applied to the skin.

Other medications you can discuss with your doctor include duloxetine (Cymbalta), gabapentin or pregabalin (Lyrica). Also, relaxation techniques and mindful meditation can be helpful for anyone with chronic pain.

Howard LeWine, M.D., is an internist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. For additional consumer health information, visit health.harvard.edu. © 2021 Harvard University. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR
Feb. 15+

VMHC DOCENT TRAINING
Are you interested in becoming a volunteer docent for the Virginia Museum of History & Culture? Training sessions take place at the museum for six Tuesdays beginning Feb. 15 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Visit bit.ly/VMHCDocent to learn more. Contact mcreech@virginiahistory.org with any questions before committing to attend the full training.

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“To you, it’s the perfect lift chair.
To me, it’s the best sleep chair I’ve ever had.”
— J. Fitzgerald, VA

You can’t always lie down in bed and sleep. Heartburn, cardiac problems, hip or back aches — and dozens of other ailments and worries. Those are the nights you’d give anything for a comfortable chair to sleep in: one that reclines to exactly the right degree, raises your feet and legs just where you want them, supports your head and shoulders properly, and operates at the touch of a button.

Our Perfect Sleep Chair® does all that and more. More than a chair or recliner, it’s designed to provide total comfort. Choose your preferred heat and massage settings, for hours of soothing relaxation. Reading or watching TV? Our chair’s recline technology allows you to pause the chair in an infinite number of settings. And best of all, it features a powerful lift mechanism that tilts the entire chair forward, making it easy to stand. You’ll love the other benefits, too. It helps with correct spinal alignment and promotes back pressure relief, to prevent back and muscle pain. The overstuffed, oversized biscuit style back and unique seat design will cradle you in comfort. Generously filled, wide armrests provide enhanced arm support when sitting or reclining. It even has a battery backup in case of a power outage.

White glove delivery included in shipping charge. Professionals will deliver the chair to the exact spot in your home where you want it, unpack it, inspect it, test it, position it, and even carry the packaging away! You get your choice of Genuine Italian Leather, plush and luxurious Brisa™, stain and liquid repellent DuraLux™ with the classic leather look or plush MicroLux™ microfiber, all handcrafted in a variety of colors to fit any decor. Call now!

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Because each Perfect Sleep Chair is a made-to-order bedding product it cannot be returned, but if it arrives damaged or defective, at our option we will repair it or replace it. © 2021 Journey Health and Lifestyle
“No matter what our age or condition, there are still untapped possibilities within us and new beauty waiting to be born.” - Dale Turner

We are in the new year. Our conversations are dotted with a recap of 2021 and continuing concerns about the “future” with pandemic news, still and rightfully so, grabbing headlines. With 300 or more days to go, 2022 resolutions seem either formidable or achievable, based on your mindset. Truly, much of aging is about mindset—the glass is half-empty or half-full. While the aspirations and dreams for the new year are usually weighty and made with sincere intentions, achieving them is centered in our daily approach to life and its blessings and curveballs.

This is where mindfulness comes in. And pardon my pun, but the concept of mindfulness is having its moment. As we strive to make sense and purpose of our lives, the particular challenges and obstacles, celebrations and milestones, I find that this is work. It is not easy to unburden ourselves from learned behaviors and habits and even people that simply do not fit into our lives anymore. Being sequestered and careful about our outside contacts and experiences for such a long time also gave us opportunities to take a long view of who we are.

So what is mindfulness and what does it mean for those of us growing older? Mindfulness is rather universally described as the mental state of focusing one’s awareness on the present by calmly inviting and accepting one’s thoughts, feelings, and senses. When we take our time to reflect on these emotions and the surrounding environment, the goal is to look at life from the lens of now and to pay attention to what is occurring in the present moment. Mindfulness can be credited or reduced stress. This practice can include meditation and incorporates specific breathing techniques to center one’s thoughts and really use it as a tool for self-exploration. Not needing any special equipment, trips to a studio or such, you center yourself in a chair, standing or walking. It is becoming so prevalent that even the famed Mayo Clinic includes mindfulness on its website and a growing number of medical practitioners of broad specialties are not only embracing it but prescribing it.

In our digital age, I see mindfulness as important to having fulfilling days which lead to a full and rewarding life. While an advocate for connectedness and technology as a tool for getting and keeping us communicated, I also see that technology often brings demands—instant response, sensory surrounds, and constant touchpoints. Being present and contemplative, with practice, continually refreshes and rebalances us.

Please begin 2022 by being mindful about your health and the health of the community; this includes getting your COVID-19 vaccine and booster, and asking those in your household to join you. If age brings wisdom, the state of mindfulness allows us to celebrate the years and our maturity. And it lets us fully appreciate each moment now.

Mindfulness: A Good Kind of Chill

Gigi Amateau, MSG, PhD
Jay White, MSG, EdD, CDP

We are surviving and thriving as aging adults during challenging times. Stress seems to be around every corner. The isolation and loneliness we experience as a result of these stressors does not support our mind, body or spirit.

Just what is mindfulness? Mindfulness is a type of meditation in which we focus on being intensely aware of what we’re sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other practices to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress. Studies suggest that practicing mindfulness can: help relieve stress, support heart health, lower blood pressure, reduce chronic pain, improve sleep, and alleviate gastrointestinal difficulties.

Take managing anxiety for example. If we feel anxious, consider taking an intentional pause. Find a place where there are few distractions. While breathing slowly and deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth, focus on that feeling of anxiety. And then step back from it. Picture yourself (this is where the guided imagery comes in) putting that feeling of anxiety into a box. With the anxious feelings compartmentalized, ask yourself about the source (or sources). Take a mental look at that source, and picture yourself sending your best energy to the source. And then check in with yourself. What does your anxiety feel like now? And keep in mind your deep, intentional breathing.

Many of us will ask ourselves, “is this level of anxiety worthy of my time and attention?” And the answer may be yes...but often, we see when we give ourselves some space and grace to take a time out while practicing our deep breathing, that our level of anxiety is related to something else. Maybe too much coffee. Maybe not enough sleep. Maybe too many things going on with caregiving responsibilities. But often, we come out of a mindfulness activity with the sense that things are better than we thought...and that it will all be ok.

Not bad for 10 minutes from of our day, is it? Join us in the Longevity Project’s Longevity Center for more information on how we can inspire and spark action to support Longevity Equity in our region.
Cozy up with Healthy Comfort Food

Like your familiar sweater or favorite pair of pants, only the most comfortable will do. And when it comes to comfort food, there are times that we crave a big bowl of something warm and tasty. Unfortunately, too many encounters with comfort food can leave those favorite pants a little too snug, since traditionally, comfort food is usually brimming with fat and plenty of empty calories. But here’s a happy thought: there’s a way to merge comfort and health—making healthy comfort food that pleases the palate and is good for you, too. Read on for an easy way to make a familiar favorite a better bite.

Soup it up. Steaming bowls brimming with soup or chili are easy to convert to healthy comfort foods. If you’re making chili, cut out half the meat and in place, you can leave those favorite pants a little too snug, since traditionally, comfort food is usually brimming with fat and plenty of empty calories. But here’s a happy thought: there’s a way to merge comfort and health—making healthy comfort food that pleases the palate and is good for you, too. Read on for an easy way to make a familiar favorite a better bite.

Slow Cooker Chicken Breast

Use your slow cooker to make simple work of preparing shredded chicken you can add to salads, sandwiches and pasta that you can enjoy now and freeze for later, too! You can use the slow cooker recipes in this book or browse the internet for plenty of cookbooks specializing in slow cooking. And if you’re worried about having too many leftovers, be sure to select a recipe that freezes well, then portion your creation into individual containers for the freezer so you can pull it out for a healthy meal on a day you don’t feel like cooking.

A Mindful Tech Tip

By Matt Bartles

Our cell phones are constantly beeping with notifications. We instinctually look, fearing it’s urgent, and see that the distraction is just an advertisement. We try to return to the conversation, only to find that the moment has passed.

Electronic devices can distract us from living in the present if they’re unmanaged. We can ensure that only meaningful notifications make it through, however. We can be confident that when our phone beeps that it deserves our attention:

- Set up reminders for medication. You can use the alarm function on your phone or install a medicine reminder app from a trusted source. Double-check that the reminder matches the prescription label!
- Remove undesirable notifications. You can manage them in the settings menu of your phone. Turn off notifications from apps that aren’t essential. You can also use the app’s built-in settings for more control.
- Uninstall old applications. Over time, our phones can accumulate apps that go unused. Many of these apps will clutter your notifications with advertisements. You can uninstall these apps in the settings menu.
- Take a step toward eliminating an unneeded distraction.

Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period Happening Now

Are you happy with your current Medicare Advantage plan? During Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period January 1st-March 31st, beneficiaries that have an existing Medicare Advantage Plan (Part C) can switch back to Original Medicare and get a Medicare Prescription Drug Plan (Part D) or change to a different Medicare Advantage Plan. If you make an election during Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period, your coverage will start the first day of the month following the receipt of your enrollment request. You may make only one election during Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period.

Keep in mind there are preventative services Medicare covers at no cost to you. Most recently the COVID 19 vaccine was added to the list of preventative services. If you are enrolled into a Medicare Advantage Plan it is important you are seeing an in-network provider to have your preventative services fully covered. You can check to see if a provider is in-network by contacting your plan directly or speaking with your provider. There are different limits for how often each service is covered so make sure to speak with your provider regarding scheduling.

For assistance with reviewing your plan options or other Medicare related questions you can contact the Virginia Insurance Counseling and Assistance Program (VICAP) at Senior Connections by email vicap@youraaa.org or phone 804-343-3014. If you are outside of Senior Connections service area and would like to locate your VICAP office call 1-800-552-3402.
Mindfulness Activities for Healthy Aging

• **Move naturally**
  Incorporate purposeful movement in your daily life. Engage in some form of physical activity daily.

• **Find purpose**
  Knowing your sense of purpose is worth up to seven years of extra life expectancy, “why I wake up in the morning.”

• **Downshift**
  Stress leads to chronic inflammation, associated with every major age-related disease. Take a few moments each day to pray, remember your family members, tap a nap or meditate.

• **Follow the 80% rule**
  Remind yourself to stop eating when your stomachs is 80% full. Eat your smallest meal in the late afternoon or early evening, and then don’t eat any more for the rest of the day.

• **Eat mostly plants**
  Incorporate more vegetables/beans in your diet. Limit intake of meat and adhere to serving sizes of 3 to 4 ounces, about the size of a deck of cards.

• **Limit Alcohol**
  Drink wine moderately with friends and/or with food.

• **Find belonging**
  Belong to some faith-based community. Research shows that attending faith-based services four times per month will add four to 14 years of life expectancy.

• **Put loved ones first**
  Put your families first. This means keeping aging parents and grandparents nearby or in the home.

• **Find the right community.**
  Chose social circles that support healthy behaviors.

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**Ride Connection**

Our goal at Ride Connection is to help older adults and persons with disabilities have knowledge about, and access to, transportation for medical and non-medical needs to help them age in place at home and live a healthy and socially-connected life.

Adults age 60 and over (and adults under age 60 receiving SSA disability benefits) are eligible for service.

Ride Connection:
- Provides information on mobility planning, education and referrals.
- Provides transportation to a limited number of medical appointments each month.
- Provides assistance with accessing public transportation.

For more information, please contact the Ride Connection Hotline at (804) 672-4495.

Now Recruiting Transportation Providers cwilhelm@youraaa.org

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**COVID-19 VACCINES FOR OLDER ADULTS**

**TIPS ON HOW TO GET A COVID-19 VACCINE**

Tips on How to Get a COVID-19 Vaccine
- Contact your state or local health department for more information.
- Ask a family member or friend to help with scheduling an appointment.
- Ask your doctor, pharmacist, or community health center if they provide vaccines.

Boosters Shots and Additional Doses
A booster shot is administered when a person has completed their initial vaccine series and protection against the virus has decreased over time. Everyone ages 18 years and older who is fully vaccinated is eligible for a booster.

Safe, Easy, Free, and Nearby COVID-19 Vaccination

The federal government is providing the vaccine free of charge to all people living in the U.S., regardless of their immigration or health insurance status.
Senior Connections, CAAA

The Home Front Updates

Senior Connections has a variety of programs with the intent of ensuring older adults in the area have a safe and healthy environment in which to live. The Residential Repair and Rehabilitation program offers low-income homeowners up to $5000 in critical repairs or home modifications. Last year, we assisted 41 individuals with those repairs, including installing grab bars and handrails, repairing heating units, plumbing, and more. Through the Chore program, Senior Connections has assisted residents to remove brush or debris from their property. In the past, we have worked with SOAR365 to provide this assistance and hope to do so in the future.

The Homeless Housing Preference Program has been two years in the making. A partnership with VCU Richmond Health and Wellness, Homeward, and Beacon Properties, we have secured a HUD waiver to allow people who are currently experiencing homelessness to have a preference on the waiting list for housing at Dominion Place on Grace Street near VCU campus. This fall, we placed our first resident and look forward to more.

New to Senior Connections this year, the Rural Housing Counseling program is designed for residents in the rural communities in the Richmond metro area who may have lost a partner in the last year. We seek to identify assets and liabilities and make budgets and plans for maintaining a life in the home of their choosing. This program is currently underway, and we are looking for additional participants. Please give us a call at 804-343-3000 if you are interested.

Thank you to our community partners for their work on impacting the lives of those most in need.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THIS GRANT OPPORTUNITY OR TO OBTAIN AN APPLICATION:
VISIT – WWW.SENIORCONNECTIONS-VA.ORG
CALL – DEE CARAS AT 804-343-3000
EMAIL – DCARAS@YOURAAA.ORG

Some examples of ways in which to utilize this funding can be to pay for in-home personal care, transportation costs, a short-term facility stay, or other healthcare services or goods to enhance the emotional, psychological and physical health of the caregiver.

The Jenkins Foundation is focused on equitable access to primary health care, access to mental health care, and the prevention and treatment of substance use disorders. The aim and impact of their work is reflected in a more efficient health care delivery system and a safer healthier and more productive community.

http://www.jenkinsfoundation-va.org

Empowering Family Caregivers

For information on: Caregiver Resources, Support Groups & Training

☐ Visit Senior Connections Website: seniorconnections-va.org
☐ Call our Caregiver Specialist: Dee Caras - 804.343.3000

Senior Connections, The Capital Area Agency on Aging
24 East Cary Street, Richmond, VA 23219

50 Years of Transforming Perspectives

Senior Connections, CAAA
Caregiver Directed Support

Funding provided by a grant received through the Jenkins Foundation designed to acknowledge the important work of informal caregivers and to support them in the prioritization of their own needs.

This grant opportunity is designated for use by the primary caregiver who assists another person who is age 60 and older, and lives in Charles City, Chesterfield, New Kent, Powhatan, Goochland, Henrico, Hanover, or Richmond city.

Some examples of ways in which to utilize this funding can be to pay for in-home personal care, transportation costs, a short-term facility stay, or other healthcare services or goods to enhance the emotional, psychological and physical health of the caregiver.

These funds are being directed to a primary caregiver assisting a partner, friend, or family member who needs assistance with at least 2 ADL’s or 1 ADL and a diagnosis of any form of dementia. This grant will provide $700 to each qualifying caregiver until funds are exhausted.

http://www.jenkinsfoundation-va.org
**Steps to take to get your affairs in order**

**Dear Savvy Senior,**

I would like to get my personal, legal and financial information organized so my kids will know what’s going on when I’m no longer around. Can you offer any tips on the best way to do this?

—Unorganized Emma

**Organizing your important papers and getting your personal and financial affairs in order is a smart idea and wonderful gift to your loved ones.**

The first step in getting your affairs in order is to gather up all your important personal, financial and legal information so you can arrange it in a format that will benefit you now, and your loved ones later.

Then you’ll need to sit down and create various lists of important information and instructions of how you want certain things handled when you die or if you become incapacitated.

Here’s a checklist to focus on:

**Personal information**

**Contacts:** Make a master list of names and phone numbers of close friends, doctors and professional advisers, such as your lawyer, accountant, broker and insurance agent.

**Medical information:** Include a list of medications you take, along with any allergies and illnesses.

**Personal documents:** Include such items as your birth certificate, Social Security card, marriage license, military discharge papers, etc.

**Secured places:** List all the places you keep under lock and key, such as safe deposit boxes, safe combination, security alarms, etc. and describe how to access them.

**Digital assets:** Make a list of all your digital assets, including everything from social media accounts to online banking accounts to home utilities that you manage online. It should include usernames and passwords. Use Rutgers Digital Assets Inventory Worksheet (bit.ly/DigitalAssetsInventory) as a guide.

**Pets:** If you have a pet, give instructions for its care.

**End of life:** Indicate your wishes for organ and tissue donation, and write out your funeral instructions. If you’ve made pre-arrangements with a funeral home, include a copy of the agreement, their contact information and whether or not you’ve prepaid.

**Legal documents**

**Will, trust and estate plan:** Include the original copy of your will and other estate planning documents you’ve made.

**Financial power of attorney:** This document names someone you trust to handle money matters if you’re incapacitated.

**Advance healthcare directives:** This includes a living will and medical power of attorney, which spell out your wishes regarding your end-of-life medical treatment when you can no longer make decisions for yourself.

**Financial records**

**Financial accounts:** Make a list of all your bank accounts, brokerage and mutual fund accounts, and any other financial assets you have.

**Debts and liabilities:** Make a list of any loans, leases or debts you have — such as mortgages, car loans, student loans, medical bills and credit card debts. Also, make a list of all credit and charge cards, including the card numbers and contact information.

**Company benefits:** List any retirement plans, pensions or health benefits from your current or former employer, including the contact information of the benefits administrator.

**Insurance:** List the insurance policies you have (life, long-term care, home, auto, Medicare, Medigap, prescription drug, etc.), including the policy numbers, agents and their phone numbers.

**Property:** List real estate, vehicles and other properties you own, rent or lease and include documents, such as deeds, titles, and loan or lease agreements.

**Taxes:** Include the location of your tax records and your tax preparer’s contact information.

Keep all your organized information and files together in one convenient location — ideally, in a fireproof filing cabinet or safe located in your home. Also be sure to review and update it every year, and don’t forget to tell your kids where they can find it.

If you need help, get a copy of *Get It Together: Organize Your Records So Your Family Won’t Have To* at Nolo.com for $17.50 for the downloadable versions, or $20 for a printed copy.

**Send your senior questions to:** Savvy Senior, PO. Box 5443, Norman, OK 73070, or visit SavvySenior.org. Jim Miller is a contributor to the NBC Today show and author of *The Savvy Senior* book.

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**Pet insurance helps keep costs in check**

**By Katia Iervasi**

Do you have a pet, or are you thinking of adding a furry friend to the family? If so, you’ll be in good company: 70% of U.S. households have a pet, according to a recent American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey.

As cute as pets are, they’re a financial commitment. Americans spent $103.6 billion on their pets in 2020 alone, APPA said.

Some expenses, like food and shelter, are predictable. But if your new puppy or kitten gets sick or injured, an unexpected medical bill can derail your budget.

For a growing number of Americans, pet insurance helps provide peace of mind.

**The cost of veterinary care**

Medical issues are almost inevitable for pets, and costs are likely to rise, said Kristen Lynch, executive director of the North American Pet Health Insurance Association, or NAPHIA.

“The fact that there’s continued innovation in the medical care of pets — just like there is for humans — means that the cost of those innovations will continue to go up.”

Dog owners spend an average of $242 on routine visits and $458 on surgical visits each year, according to APPA. The cost for cat owners is slightly lower, at $178 for routine visits and $201 for surgical visits.

“I’d say at least half of the clients I come in contact with have money concerns,” Dr. TB Thompson, a Phoenix-based veterinarian at Natural Pets HQ, said in an email.

“When pets get into complicated, life-threatening medical trouble, costs add up fast.”

Pet insurance won’t reimburse you for every penny you spend at the vet, but it can help prevent you from being slapped with an expensive bill.

A policy will typically pay 70% to 90% of your costs after you pay a deductible, which can range from $0 to $1,000 or more.

“Consider buying pet insurance unless you can easily fund treating a pet emergency that costs $2,500 and up,” Thompson said.

**Several types to consider**

There are a few types of pet insurance plans. Comprehensive plans, the most robust, help cover the cost of care due to accidents, illnesses and surgeries, as well as vaccinations and diagnostic tests.

Accident and illness coverage helps pay for emergency care, surgeries, hospitalizations and prescription medications, while accident-only policies help cover expenses after an accident.

Some insurers also offer wellness plans, which take care of certain tests, exams, vaccinations and preventive treatments.

While pet insurance can stop you from dipping into your savings to pay a vet bill, it is an added cost.

The average cost of an accident and illness policy is $584 per year for dogs and $342 for cats, according to NAPHIA. For an accident-only policy, you could pay $218 for dogs and $134 for cats.

Premiums are based on a range of factors, including:

- Species. Dogs are more expensive to insure than cats, for example. Coverage for other types of animals is rare.
- Breed. Some breeds are predisposed to medical conditions, which can increase the cost of coverage.
- Age. As pets age, they’re more likely to

See PET INSURANCE, page 14

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**FiftyPlus — January 2022**

Makes a great gift!
Prepare yourself against natural disaster

By Liz Weston

Emergency preparedness experts recommend that you have a “go bag” and a “stay bin” for disasters: kits with supplies to help you survive a few days if you have to evacuate your home or shelter in place. Preparing your finances for natural disasters is also smart. Having cash on hand, access to credit and the right insurance coverage can help you get through perilous times. Fortifying your home against disasters can also be a good investment.

Not everyone can make these preparations, of course. People with the fewest resources often suffer the brunt of disasters. But anything you can do to bolster your situation now could help you limit the toll.

Stash some cash

Having cash on hand could help you pay for groceries, gas, shelter and other necessities if ATMs and payment systems aren’t functioning, which could happen if the power goes out or cyberattacks knock systems offline.

You may need more than you think, especially if you’re away from your home for more than a few days. Insurance consumer advocate Amy Bach recommends keeping at least $2,000 in a safe place somewhere in your home.

After a widespread disaster, there is often “incredible competition” for rentals and other lodging, and a cash deposit could help you secure a place to stay, said Bach, executive director of the nonprofit United Policyholders.

The currency should be in addition to any emergency savings you have at the bank. Again, anything is better than nothing.

While financial planners typically recommend an emergency fund equal to three to six months of expenses, even a couple hundred dollars can help you cope.

Get some credit

Your insurance may have high deductibles or other limitations on your coverage that require you to pay thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket. Earthquake and hurricane policies, for example, often have deductibles of 10% or more of the insured value.

Insurers also may limit how much they pay for upgrades needed to meet current building codes or for replacing older roofs, Bach said.

A home equity line of credit (HELOC) can give you access to a relatively inexpensive source of money in an emergency. You’ll need to set this up long before disaster strikes, however, since lenders won’t let you borrow against a damaged home. Resist the urge to tap this credit for other purposes, so that the money is available when you need it.

An alternative if you’re a renter or otherwise can’t qualify for a HELOC is to ask your bank for a personal line of credit. Credit cards can also help pay the bills if there’s enough available credit.

Once you have $500 or so set aside for emergencies, consider paying down your credit cards and aim to use no more than 30% of your credit limits. Using even less of your credit limits would be even better, because it frees up more space on your cards and also helps to build or maintain your credit scores.

Try to cover the big risks

Check your home’s susceptibility to various disasters at freehomerisk.com, a database created by HazardHub, which supplies risk data to insurance companies.

Each hazard your property might face is graded from A to F. The lower the grade, the more you should consider ways to mitigate the risk if you can, said HazardHub co-founder Bob Frady.

That could mean buying additional coverage. A typical homeowner or renter’s policy doesn’t cover damage from floods or earthquakes, for example, but such coverage can be purchased separately.

Review your policy to see what’s covered and what’s not. Make sure you have replacement coverage for your possessions rather than actual cash value coverage, which pays considerably less.

You’ll also want at least 24 months of loss-of-use coverage, which pays for your living expenses while your home is rebuilt, Frady said.

Widespread disasters can cause even longer rebuilding times. For example, “It usually takes at least two years to rebuild after a wildfire,” she said.

Protect your property if you can

There’s no way to make your home entirely disaster-proof, but there are ways to “harden it” to reduce potential losses, Frady said.

Frady helped start HazardHub after a friend’s home suffered significant uninsured damage when a nearby river overflowed its banks. The friend didn’t realize she lived next to a flood zone because she wasn’t required by her mortgage lender to buy flood insurance, Frady said.

If she’d known, she could have purchased the insurance and taken steps to protect her property, such as regularly changing the batteries in her sump pump, which failed, and keeping valuable items out of the basement or other low points in the house.

Installing storm shutters may reduce losses to hurricanes and tornadoes, while bolting your house to its foundation can help it survive an earthquake.

“There’s power in knowing what the perils are, and that can lead you to create a safer location,” Frady said. —AP

Pet insurance

From page 13
become ill or injured, Lynch said. Keep this in mind if you plan to adopt an older pet from a shelter.

Suggestions for new owners

As a new pet owner, many of these factors are out of your control. But there are a few things you can do to score a lower premium.

Look at the fine print. Consider choosing a higher deductible and lower reimbursement level.

Check for discounts. Some companies offer discounts for insuring multiple pets or for military service.

Shop around. There are around 20 pet insurers in the U.S. competing for your business, so let them. Compare quotes from three insurers for the same amount of coverage, and go with the best pet insurance company for your budget.

In Lynch’s view, some pet insurance is better than none. “People avoid taking their pets to the vet because they’re afraid of what those costs will be,” she said.

“I like to think pet insurance gives us the ability to say yes to those decisions at a time when we’re emotional, stressed and financially strapped about other things.”

—AP/NerdWallet
Options to pay for long-term care needs

By Samuel V. Gaeta, CFP®

Long-term care insurance helps pay for the cost of home healthcare or a nursing home. It also covers extended illness or disability.

While long-term care (LTC) coverage can be great for retirees, premiums have begun to rise in recent years, making it a difficult expense for those on a limited income.

So, how do you determine the best way to prepare for long-term care costs in retirement? Here are two factors you should consider:

Would you prefer a long-term care facility or in-home care?

Before you determine what kind of insurance you want, you need to determine how much LTC will likely cost. A good first step is identifying where you want to live.

The average price to live in a nursing home in our region of the county is more than $140,000 a year ($385 a day) in a semi-private room and $157,000 ($430 a day) in a private room, according to Genworth. By 2030, those costs are projected to be more.

Tour the LTC facilities in your area to see how much they cost and determine whether you can envision living there.

What if you want to live in your own home? You can maintain that comfort and familiarity by hiring someone to come to your house. The average price of in-home care in our region is $55,200 per year. The average price of home healthcare is slightly higher at $56,700 per year.

Should you choose traditional long-term care insurance or a hybrid plan?

Once you decide where you want to live, the next step is to determine whether you can self-insure the cost — essentially figuring out whether you can earmark some of your current assets to pay for these long-term care expenses if needed.

I recommend thinking about this in a what-if context: “If I go into an LTC facility for ‘x’ years at ‘y’ cost, can I pay for this cost without it affecting my other retirement goals?”

If the answer is yes, self-insurance is most likely going to be the most cost-effective and flexible solution to cover a possible long-term care expense.

If the answer is no, but you have substantial liquid assets held outside of qualified retirement accounts, a hybrid LTC insurance policy might be an alternative solution.

These insurance policies are designed to provide LTC benefits, but use whole life insurance as the foundation. After you pay a single up-front premium, the policy pays a specified monthly benefit for LTC for a predetermined number of years.

If you end up not needing LTC, or you decide to stop insuring the risk at any point, you would get your original premium back. Hybrid long-term care policies tend to have a more transparent cost structure and more flexibility than a traditional LTC policy.

Also consider the likelihood of your rates rising during the life of your policy. A report in 2019 claims General Electric does not have enough funds to cover claims for its LTC insurance plans. As a result, the company plans to raise premiums by $1.7 billion over the next 10 years.

Many companies are doing the same thing. In this case, if you are unable to pay your premium, your policy will lapse and you may get nothing back.

I recommend talking to a Certified Financial Planner to determine the best option for you.

Ed. Note: A public relations firm was paid to assist with media placement of this article.

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Five ways to save energy this winter

By Family Features

Winter is the time of year when energy bills can skyrocket as we look for ways to stay warm and cozy indoors on chilly days.

Focusing on energy efficiency can help you keep your home temperature comfortable and your energy bills at bay while also reducing your carbon footprint.

Energy efficiency means using less energy to accomplish the same tasks while cutting energy bills and reducing pollution in the process.

With Americans slated to spend an average of $746 on natural gas this winter, according to the Energy Information Administration’s “Winter Fuels Outlook,” now is a perfect time to focus on energy efficiency.

Consider these suggestions from the experts at Best Pick Reports for ways to improve your home’s energy efficiency without breaking the bank this winter.

1. Do a heating systems check-up
   Be sure all vents and registers throughout your home are clear of obstructions.
   Checking that all plugs, vents and appliances are in safe, working order can also help improve efficiency and prevent potential hazards.

2. Install energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances
   It’s important to replace old light bulbs and appliances in your home with newer, energy-efficient ones. Using LED light bulbs in place of traditional incandescent bulbs can save homeowners about $225 in energy costs each year, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

3. Add insulation
   Install insulation in and around windows, walls and doors to decrease heat flow from warmer spaces to colder ones, helping to maintain your home’s temperature and lower your heating and cooling costs.

4. Improve flooring and windows
   Adding rugs or carpet to hardwood floors and ceramic tiles can help prevent drafts and make the room feel cozier.

5. Use an energy-efficient space heater
   A space heater is a simple option for heating up a single chilly room for a short amount of time, which makes it perfect for those looking to save money and energy.

Some space heaters are designed specifically for energy efficiency. They use infrared technology to heat rooms, sensing spots that need heat and distributing it accordingly by heating objects instead of filling the space with heat.

Do it every year

Every winter, be sure to take action to make your home more energy efficient. You don’t have to do it alone, however. You can hire a professional to help you with energy efficiency projects; just be sure to do your homework.

Look for unbiased customer reviews on independent business directories, or review websites like Best Pick Reports and Five Star Rated.

These printed directories and online sites often use a combination of third-party research and consumer reviews to rate contractors. Some even offer guarantees on the quality of work.

Once you have everything in place, you can reduce the amount of money you spend on heating costs this winter without sacrificing comfort or convenience.

The Invention of the Year

The world’s lightest and most portable mobility device

Once in a lifetime, a product comes along that truly moves people.

Introducing the future of battery-powered personal transportation . . . The Zinger.

Throughout the ages, there have been many important advances in mobility. Canes, walkers, rollators, and scooters were created to help people with mobility issues get around and retain their independence. Lately, however, there haven’t been any new improvements to these existing products or developments in this field. Until now.

Recently, an innovative design engineer who’s developed one of the world’s most popular products created a completely new breakthrough . . . a personal electric vehicle. It’s called the Zinger, and there is nothing out there quite like it.

The first thing you’ll notice about the Zinger is its unique look. It doesn’t look like a scooter. Its sleek, lightweight yet durable frame is made with aircraft grade aluminum. It weighs only 47.2 lbs but can handle a passenger that’s up to 275 lbs! It features one-touch folding and unfolding – when folded it can be wheeled around like a suitcase and fits easily into a backseat or trunk. Then, there are the steering levers. They enable the Zinger to move forward, backward, turn on a dime and even pull right up to a table or desk. With its compact yet powerful motor it can go up to 6 miles an hour and its rechargeable battery can go up to 8 miles on a single charge.

With its low center of gravity and inflatable tires it can handle rugged terrain and is virtually tip-proof. Think about it, you can take your Zinger almost anywhere, so you don’t have to let mobility issues rule your life.

Why take our word for it. You can try the Zinger out for yourself with our exclusive home trial. Call now, and find out how you can try out a Zinger of your very own.

Zinger Chair®

Call now and receive a utility basket absolutely FREE with your order.

1-888-348-0349

Please mention code 116450 when ordering.

The Zinger and Zoomer Chairs are personal electric vehicles and are not medical devices nor wheelchairs. They are not intended for medical purposes to provide mobility to persons restricted to a sitting position. They are not covered by Medicare nor Medicaid.
The friendly, beautiful towns of Provence

By Victor Block

Some places are more than a destination. Provence, nestled in the southeastern corner of France, immerses visitors in a placid, captivating lifestyle.

Although the nearby Cote d’Azur and French Riviera have many advocates, visitors may encounter traffic and crowded, blanket-to-blanket beaches.

By contrast, in the tiny towns and even smaller villages of Provence, a Maryland-sized enclave, tourists are few and far between.

Last fall, my wife Fyllis and I decided to stay in the “real” Provence. We rented a beautifully renovated century-old farmhouse in the village of Pernes-les-Fontaines, a fortified Medieval town surrounded by remnants of stone ramparts.

With our cozy home base, we ventured out each day to explore the nearby historical-rich villages, with their stone buildings along narrow, winding cobblestone streets and compact tree-shaded squares lined by sidewalk cafés.

There were no waits at restaurants, no lines at attractions and few other English-speakers.

Most beautiful villages

During ancient times, many settlements were perched on the peaks of towering hills for defensive purposes. Today, they’re collectively called hill towns, and each has its own unique appeal.

Travelers reach them by way of twisty one-lane roads, hoping not to meet another vehicle heading in the opposite direction. It’s wise to park just outside a village and enter on foot.

A French association has accomplished a task that would seem impossible. Among all of the magnificent places throughout the country, it designated 164 as “Plus Beaux Villages de France” (Most Beautiful Villages in France). After my stay in Provence, I’d say that many more could be added to the list.

Seventeen of the honored enclaves are in Provence, including the village of Gordes. With a population of about 1,600, Gordes has been the site of a settlement since Neolithic times.

It overlooks surrounding valleys from its strategic location on the peak of a towering rock, making it one of the most photogenic settings in all of France. The site is topped by an imposing castle originally built in the 11th century and remodeled during the Renaissance.

Menerbes, another “Most Beautiful” town, was brought to the world’s attention by British-born author Peter Mayle’s popular book My Year in Provence, published in 1991.

Despite centuries of wars and turmoil, Menerbes remains miraculously intact and preserved. Most of its restaurants and shops are grouped at the bottom of the mountain; a tranquil town square awaits at the top.

The setting is very different in Roussillon, located near once-active ochre mines. Many of its 300-year-old houses are painted shades of red, pink and orange that echo the colors of the surrounding rock cliffs. I found it challenging to stop taking pictures of this Technicolor scene.

Echoes of the past

Phoenicians who arrived in France in 600 B.C. were followed by Greeks, then Romans. While they held sway, from about 100 B.C. until the disintegration of their empire five centuries later, this swatch of fertile land became one of Rome’s wealthiest provinces. During the Middle Ages, it was invaded by successive waves of marauders (hence the need for fortifications).

Evidence of this past exists in every village. In Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, remains of the Greek city of Glanum are located near a Roman triumphal arch and funerary monument. The two-tiered Roman amphitheater in Arles dates from the first century B.C.E.

Some of these well-preserved Roman antiquities continue to function in various ways. The arena in Arles hosts bull fights, concerts and other events, while plays and musical productions take place in Roman theaters in Orange and Vaison-la-Romaine.

I could continue through the almost A-to-Z list of inviting, historic hill towns, but perhaps what makes a visit to this corner of France most memorable is its food, wine and people.

Local fare, local friends

Much of France’s well-deserved reputation for fabulous food and wonderful wine is based upon what is grown, made and prepared in Provence. It didn’t take long for Fyllis and me to appreciate each mouthful and sip.

The vegetables on our plates, often seasoned with ubiquitous garlic and local olive oil, grew in fields close by, as had fresh-from-the-farm fruit. Regional specialties include nougat, artisanal chocolate and candied fruits tempt the palate and challenge your next step on a scale. Restaurant food portions are large, and
What are frequent-flyer miles worth?

A few years back, some economist with nothing better to do calculated that frequent-flyer miles were the world’s third or fourth largest currency. The total value of miles in circulation can only have increased since then.

But calculating aggregate value doesn’t really help anyone: The real test is how much miles are worth to you, individually. And that’s a surprisingly complicated calculation.

There’s an entire community of blog writers devoted to frequent-flyer minutia and arcana. And they regularly post current values for airline miles, transferrable bank miles and hotel points.

Most recently, Gary Leff’s excellent blog, View from the Wing (viewfromthewing.com/value-of-frequent-flyer-miles) posted its own latest values, alongside current values from two other top blogs, One Mile at a Time (onemileatatime.com) and The Points Guy (thepointsguy.com).

The interesting finding isn’t that they show substantial variance. In fact, they’re all in surprisingly close agreement on the value of miles in each program:

- Giant airlines: Each mile you earn is worth 1.3 to 1.5 cents when applied to a ticket for a future trip, with Alaska and Korean earning a tad more; Delta and Hawaiian a tad less.
- Bank cards with transferrable miles (American Express, Capital One, Chase, and Citi) generate a value of 1.6 to 1.8 cents a mile.
- Hotel points: 0.4 to 0.7 cents a mile, with Hyatt higher at 1.4 to 1.7 cents.

You won’t find much disagreement about collecting points by flying: Regardless of precise value, they’re worth something. The complexities arise with valuing miles earned by credit card.

The problem is straightforward:

- The best-earning bank cards earn 2 cents cash per dollar spent, compared with one airline mile per dollar charged. A few even earn two miles. So, on average, regardless of airline affiliation, you’re better off concentrating your charges on a 2-cent or 2-mile-back reward card than on an airline card.
- Many cash-back credit cards earn only one cent per dollar, so if that’s what you’ve got, your best bet is either to use a miles card or switch to a higher-earning credit card.
- Most airline cards earn one mile per dollar charged.
- Some miles-earning bank cards offer premium rates — up to five miles per dollar charged — on some charge categories, so consider one of those cards for just those specific categories.

Flash sales are a better deal

I’ve been amassing miles for years, and generally concluded that the best use was for premium cabin international trips. But those high-value calculations you see comparing mile cost with cash cost for business class to Europe using regular business class fares are ridiculous.

Sure, you can get a $4,000 business-class ticket on some airlines for around 120,000 miles, but those miles are worth the calculated 3.3 cents each — if only if — you’d be willing to pay $4,000 if you didn’t have the miles. Personally, I’d probably be willing to pay no more than $1,500 for that ticket, so the value of the miles to me is about 1.25 cents each.

You can often catch airline flash sales for business class to Europe from the West Coast at less than $2,000 round trip, which puts the miles worth 1.67 cents. And you also have to consider the fact that many — if not most — 120,000-mile frequent-flyer trips are available only on flights at unpopular hours or trips with multiple connections and long layovers.

Bring the natural benefits of sunlight indoors.

Ever since the first human went into a dark cave and built a fire, people have realized the importance of proper indoor lighting. Unfortunately, since Edison invented the light bulb, lighting technology has remained relatively prehistoric. Modern light fixtures do little to combat many symptoms of improper lighting, such as eyestrain, dryness or burning. As more and more of us spend longer hours in front of a computer monitor, the results are compounded...and the effects of indoor lighting are not necessarily limited to physical well-being. Many people believe that the quantity and quality of light can play a part in one’s mood and work performance. Now there’s a better way to bring the positive benefits associated with natural sunlight indoors.

A floor lamp that spreads sunshine all over a room

The Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp will change the way you see and feel about your living or work spaces. Studies show that A floor lamp that spreads sunshine all over a room. Use the Balance Spectrum Floor Lamp...

Experience sunshine indoors at the touch-of-a-switch. This amazing lamp is easy on the eyes and easy on the hands. It features a special “soft-touch, flicker-free” rocker switch that’s easier to use than traditional toggle or twist switches. Its flexible goose-neck design enables you to go anywhere and find the light where you need it most. The high-tech electronics, user-friendly design, and bulb that last 10 times longer than an ordinary bulb make this lamp a must-have.

Here is a guarantee that no other lamp can make. If the Balanced Spectrum® bulb ever burns out, we’ll send you a free replacement bulb, all you pay is a small fee for shipping and handling. The Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp comes with firstSTREET’s exclusive guarantee. Try this lamp for 90 days and return it for the product purchase price if not completely satisfied.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Feb. 3

LEARN ABOUT FOLIES BERGÈRE STAR

The Virginia Museum hosts a lecture on Ruby Richards, a performer who replaced Josephine Baker as the star attraction at the Folies Bergère.

The lecture by curator Dr. Michael Taylor and roundtable discussion with the family of Ruby Richards will take place Thurs., Feb. 3 in the Leslie Cheek Theatre from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. For free tickets, visit bit.ly/RubyRichards and click on “Talks.” Call (804) 340-1400 with questions.
then some. After we ordered a steak to share at an outdoor café, the waitperson suggested, only partly in jest, that we move to a larger table which could accommodate the oversized slab of delicious meat.

Wine has been made in this region for at least 2,600 years, first by the Greeks and then the Romans. Provence is known predominately for rose wine, which accounts for about half of the local production. Some oenophiles also praise its spicy, full-flavored reds.

Even beyond the historic paths of the past, and abundant flavors of food and wine, we found the people of Provence to be perhaps its most endearing treasure. Topping the list is their genuine friendliness.

If you’re like me, you conclude that, in most cases, piling your charges on a two-cent-back cash card and using the money to buy a ticket beats piling charges on a card that earns one mile per dollar charged. Also, two-miles-per-dollar cards look good.

When I first looked, miles were really valuable: fares were consistent and award charts were more generous. But frequent flyer miles, like veteran travel writers, do not improve with age. The quicker you use them, the more value you’ll retain.

Send email to Ed Perkins at eperkins@mind.net or check out his rail travel website at rail-guru.com.

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Comedy man Mel Brooks shares stories

By Douglass K. Daniel

Bagels and Nova Scotia lox for the writing team’s breakfast while punching up the script for the movie “Blazing Saddles.” Earl Grey tea and English digestive biscuits while developing Gene Wilder’s idea for “Young Frankenstein.” Cottage cheese topped with fruit while hashing out yet another writer’s pitch for “Silent Movie.”

Besides an uncanny memory for food, Mel Brooks has the skill of an alchemist turning the base metal of others’ ideas into comedy treasure.

But the lead comes before the gold. With the notable exception of “The Producers,” Brooks’ greatest hits have been a team effort that usually began as a nugget in someone else’s mind.

In his new memoir All About Me! the unmatched self-promoter, now 95, generously shares the credit...most of the time.

Look elsewhere to hear a different side of the Mel Brooks story — some of his collaborators have grumbled about being elbowed aside as he grabbed all the glory he could. The same goes for his personal life — his first marriage is barely noted in spite of three children and years of litigation — and anything else that might cast a shadow on the beloved funny man.

As advertised, All About Me! is a narrowly focused celebration of a poor Jewish kid who grew up from Brooklyn street-corner jokester to become synonymous with hearty laughter and naughty chuckles. It’s a surprisingly gentle remembrance from a comedian known for mocking anything considered sacred in America.

Long route to Hollywood

The entertainment world was an escape for Melvin Kaminsky, the youngest of four brothers whose father died when Melvin was 2 and whose mother worked hard to get enough pennies for a movie ticket.

Actor and director Mel Brooks at the Emmy Awards in Los Angeles in 1998, when he won Best Guest Actor in a Comedy Series. In November, Brooks, now 95, published a memoir about his life in comedy.

See MEL BROOKS, page 22
New and newsworthy plants for 2022

By Lela Martin

We can all agree that 2021 was a year for strange news, from British bakeries using illegal U.S. sprinkles for cake décor to the sky-high prices for NFT (non-fungible token) artwork such as the $69 million paid for a digital photo collage.

In the midst of 24/7 broadcasting, however, you may have missed some of these unusual plant articles.

Philodendron’s price peaks

Philodendron is a large genus in the Araceae family that contains extremely attractive tropical plants. Its name is derived from the Greek words philo (love), and dendron (tree). Literally interpreted, its name means “lover of trees” and refers to the vine-growing species that use trees as a means of support.

Since philodendron grow naturally under heavy tree canopies, they can grow in low light, which is a great characteristic for indoor plants.

A hybrid cultivar known as “Pink Princess” seemed to take off in popularity during the pandemic. Generally, hybrids require medium to bright indirect light to retain their foliage color and to thrive. With more people working from home, colorful foliage and unique specimens became coveted.

According to Joyce Mast of Bloomscape (a website that sells plants), “The ‘Pink Princess’ is a rare and much sought-after philodendron with stunning, variegated dark green and pink leaves. One of the reasons it is expensive is due to the fact that growers cannot guarantee every plant of this variety will actually have enough pink on the green leaves to sell as a pink princess.”

Southern Living reported in May that Etsy was listing the ‘Princess Pink’ philodendrons for almost $2,000. I found several for sale in a local garden center with a price of $800 for a plant in an eight-inch pot! Owners and growers need to be aware that the leaves must have green variegation mixed with the pink, since the plant needs chlorophyll that is produced by the green leaves.

Plants grown in space

In 2021, NASA reported on its three separate projects to grow plants in space. The Vegetable Production System, called Veggie, is a space garden that resides on the International Space Station. Veggie’s purpose is to help NASA study plant growth in microgravity, while adding fresh food to the astronauts’ diet and enhancing their mental and physical well-being.

Holding six plants, Veggie is about the size of a carry-on piece of luggage. Each plant snuggles in a “pillow” of clay-based growth media that help distribute water, nutrients and air around the roots. A bank of light-emitting diodes (LEDs) above the plants produces the light suited for the plants’ growth.

Veggie has produced lettuce, cabbage, kale and zinnias. Some of the plants were harvested and eaten by the crew members, with remaining samples returned to Earth for analysis.

The Advanced Plant Habitat (APH) is another growth chamber for plant research. Unlike Veggie, the astronauts don’t tend this garden. It is enclosed and automated with cameras and more than 180 sensors that are in constant interactive contact with a team on the ground at Kennedy Space Center.

The Biological Research in Canisters (BRIC) is used to study the effects of space on organisms small enough to grow in petri dishes, such as yeast and microbes. BRIC-LED is the latest version, with added LEDs to support mosses, algae and cyanobacteria that need light to make their food. Soon researchers will use BRIC to conduct studies.

Arborists have to

In Sheffield, U.K., homeowner Bharat Mistry had a fir tree between his yard and a neighbor’s. Over 25 years, and at the neighbor’s request, he climbed up the 16-foot tree above head height and pruned it in a ball shape.

During the pandemic lockdown, the neighbor asked to have the tree removed, according to the BBC. Fed up by the birds in the trees and their excrement, the neighbor called in a tree removal team,
Mel Brooks
From page 20

His stint at a Catskills resort as a clown-
ish teen, contrasted with harrowing
months in the Army defusing bombs in the
wake of the Battle of the Bulge, followed
by a postwar Army assignment to an occupa-
tion entertainment unit helped make his
heavenly dream more earthbound.

Brooks refined his talent for comedy
during his first big break, writing for Sid
Caesar’s “Your Show of Shows” and “Cae-
sar’s Hour” series during TV’s Golden
Age.

Lean years followed, but Brooks kept at
it, thanks to his “2,000-Year-Old Man” rou-
tine with Carl Reiner, co-creating TV’s
“Get Smart,” and writing and directing his
first film, “The Producers” (1968), which
he adapted decades later into a Broadway
juggernaut.

Along the way, Brooks met the likes of
Cary Grant (debonair, but dull, he says),
John Wayne (he thought the script for
“Blazing Saddles” was hilarious but too
dirty for an appearance by America’s Fa-
vorite Cowboy), and Alfred Hitchcock (the
Master of Suspense kept Brooks hanging
on whether he thought “High Anxiety”
was insult or homage — he finally sent a
note with a case of fine wine).

And there was actress Anne Bancroft.
Her unlikely attraction to Brooks’ off-kilter
personality resulted in that rare Hollywood
production, a durable marriage.

To avoid confusing ticket-buyers,
Brooks kept his name off his production
company’s non-comedies “The Elephant
Man,” “Frances,” “The Fly” and other top-
notch films.

His all-too-brief discussions about the
business side of the movie business — he
demanded foreign rights to his later pic-
tures and was rewarded with more money
than he earned domestically — are wel-
come aside.

What’s missing
Anyone looking for introspection will
be disappointed. While Brooks celebrates
his reputation for “dangerous” comedy,
he’s taking no chances with today’s hot
topics.

Look elsewhere for Brooks to muse
over whether “Blazing Saddles” with its
liberal use of the N-word would survive in
our politically correct culture (no, he has
said).

Reconsidering the misogyny and homo-
phobia that were part of his generation’s
comedy canon just isn’t on the menu.

Yes, too much of “All About Me!” is self-
congratulatory — if Brooks isn’t praising
himself, he quotes others praising him —
and, yes, recounting plots and casts for his
films comes off as superficial.

His memoir works best, which is more
often than not, as a look back in laughter
from a man who isn’t through trying to
make us gasp for breath.

—AP

Invasive weeds for sale?
Labeled one of “the world’s worst invasive
weeds” by the U.S. Department of Agricul-
ture (USDA) and banned by federal legisla-
tion, Japanese blood grass or cogongrass
(Imperata cylindrica) is available to purchase
from nurseries, garden centers and online re-
tailers, according to a 2021 study by the Uni-
versity of Massachusetts Amherst and re-
ported by Smithsonian Magazine.

Researchers discovered that cogongrass
and nearly 1,300 other invasive plants are
still become invasive. Japanese barberry, Chi-
inese privet, Norway maple, Russian olive,
garlic mustard, Canada thistle and kudzu.

Look out for plants in the news during
2022!

Lela Martin is a Master Gardener with
the Chesterfield County office of the Virginia
Cooperative Extension.

Gardening
From page 21

who cut the tree in half, removing the
branches that hung over his driveway. The
before and after photos became an inter-
net sensation.

While there was probably a rift between
the neighbors, the true damage will be to
the tree. Certified arborists recommend
that no more than 30% of a tree or bush
should be removed at one time.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR
Jan. 19+

POE BIRTHDAY BASH
Celebrate Edgar Allen Poe’s birthday with the Poe Museum from
Wed., Jan. 19 through Jan. 26. In-person and virtual events will
be held as the Museum kicks off their centennial celebration. Visit
bit.ly/PoeBirthday or call (804) 648-5523 for up-to-date information.
Crossword Puzzle

Find a new crossword every day on our website at www.TheBeaconNewspapers.com/puzzles.

Across
1. Baseball promotion giveaway
2. Surreal Salvador
3. Down in the dumps
11. “So that’s your secret plan!”
13. Person of the Year
16. Location of a 1962 crisis
19. Likely to get high SAT scores
20. The wisest space on the whole rack
21. Member of a band induced into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2021
23. “Let your joy be in your journey, not in some distant ___” (Tim Cook)
25. I-95, for example
33. Location of a 1972 burglary
34. “There is ___” (theist’s declaration)
36. “Mayday!”, in Morse Code
37. “Um, excuse me ..."
38. Baseball promotion giveaway
39. International court
40. Insert in a USPS-based autograph request
41. Partisanship
42. “That Flamenco dancer is amazing!”
46. Parts of an eye
48. She appeared in the Get Back documentary
49. Location of a 1982 skirmish
50. “Alice who got a spin-off"
51. “Far ___ from me to criticize, but ..."
52. Home of the Pantheon
54. Insult to injury
55. The waitress on “Alice” who got a spin-off
56. “Alice who got a spin-off"

Down
1. Top animated movie of 2006
2. “Um, excuse me ...”
3. Oldest of the Smurfs
4. Mortgage signers
5. Last word in the Pledge of Allegiance
6. Journalist who debuted in Action Comics #1
7. Early Peruvian
8. “Wait at the curb until it’s ___ cross”
9. Doogie Howser, M.D.
10. Viagra or Valium
11. Oldest of the Smurfs
12. Mortgage signers
13. Oldest of the Smurfs
14. Oldest of the Smurfs
15. Wizardry
16. Parts of an eye
17. Try to use influence
18. People-eating monster
19. Praiseful poem
20. Official formal end
21. Partisanship
22. Praise poem
23. “That Flamenco dancer is amazing!”
24. “Um, excuse me ..."
25. I-95, for example
26. Location of a 1962 crisis
27. Location of a 1982 skirmish
28. Location of a 1972 burglary
29. “Alice who got a spin-off"
30. Home of the Pantheon
31. Created a manuscript
32. Terrif
33. Location of a 1972 burglary
34. “Alice who got a spin-off"
35. “Alice who got a spin-off"
36. “Alice who got a spin-off"
37. “Alice who got a spin-off"
38. “Alice who got a spin-off"
39. “Alice who got a spin-off"
40. Insert in a USPS-based autograph request
41. “Um, excuse me ..."
42. “Alice who got a spin-off"
43. Location of a 1982 skirmish
44. Location of a 1982 skirmish
45. Location of a 1982 skirmish
46. Location of a 1982 skirmish
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73. Location of a 1982 skirmish

Answers on page 21.
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