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## HealthNet News

September/October 2018

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

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### **African-Americans Miss Out on Potentially Life-Extending Cancer Drug Trials**

Although African-Americans make up over **13 percent of the U.S. population**, **they make up than five percent of patients** in clinical trials for cancer drugs. In their investigative report, Propublica found African-Americans are grossly underrepresented in cancer trials even when the type of cancer disproportionately affects them. The Food and Drug Administration cannot require drug makers to increase minority participation in their trials. A **hematologist interviewed** for the report noted African-Americans miss out on trials because of "financial hurdles, logistical challenges, and their lingering distrust of the medical community due to a history of being victimized by

medical experimentation." Sadly, for African-Americans, not participating in drug trials can mean lost life expectancy.

### Nearly 30 Percent of Opioid Prescriptions Have No Diagnosis

A new study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that almost 30 percent of prescriptions written for opioid medications did not include any diagnosis. The authors based their findings on data from the "National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey." This survey collects data from visits to physician offices by insured and uninsured patients. The high percentage of prescriptions written without a diagnosis is worrisome says the *Lown Institute*, an organization advocating against overuse of medicine. The results of this study may mean doctors are prescribing pain medications *inappropriately*.

### Not Such a Sweet Deal

Artificial sweeteners like Splenda, Sweet-&-Low, and NutraSweet were introduced as a safe way for dieters and diabetics to enjoy sweet tasting food and drinks without a spike in calories or blood sugar. Even though they have zero calories, artificial sweeteners are not inert ingredients. Dr. Michael Gregor, the physician behind the *NutritionFacts* website, cites a recent human research study that showed artificial sweeteners *caused glucose intolerance* by altering the microbes in the gut. Glucose intolerance is in turn linked to chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

### Everyday Discrimination Can Raise a Woman's Blood Pressure

What is everyday discrimination? For a woman, it's a driver whistling at you; it's being told to smile more when you frown; or it's getting interrupted when you try to talk at a meeting. A *new research study* by psychologist *Danielle Beatty Moody* of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, found that women who regularly experience these little indignities over time actually develop elevated blood pressure. Dr. Beatty Moody's group analyzed data from a study of middle-aged women who answered questions about their health and who received extensive annual check-ups over ten years. One of the questions they were asked is whether they experienced everyday discrimination. After ten years, women who experienced discrimination had systolic blood pressure that was two units higher and diastolic blood pressure one unit higher than average.

## A Little Hemp in Your Coffee?

Cannabinoids, one of 80 active types of chemicals in the cannabis (marijuana) plant, are finding their way into [coffee](#), [candy](#), [cocktails](#), and nutritional supplements sold at boutiques, spas, and natural food stores. The CBDs are being harvested from hemp, a plant related to marijuana. Cannabinoids (CBDs) do not have the psychoactive effects of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which is found in much higher concentrations in marijuana. CBDs are also believed to have beneficial health effects including reducing anxiety, and promoting relaxation.

The [Food and Drug Administration](#) does not approve of products containing CBDs for treatment or disease prevention. The federal [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (DEA) says inter-state sales of foods containing CBDs is illegal. However, the DEA is not currently pursuing stores that violate the law.

In Connecticut, the [UConn College of Agriculture](#) is conducting research to unlock the pharmaceutical potential of industrial hemp. As for the health benefits of the cannabis plant, you can learn more on UCLA's [Cannabis Research Initiative](#) website.

## Transgender Youth at Higher Risk of Suicide

September is National Suicide Prevention Month. According to National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), members of the [LGBTQ community](#) are at higher risk of attempting suicide. A new study published in [Pediatrics](#) found that transgender youth are at a much higher risk of attempting suicide than their cis-gender peers. (Cis-gender refers to people who identify with the sex on their birth certificate.)

Over 50 percent of transgender male adolescents attempt suicide. Nearly 30 percent of transgender female adolescents attempt suicide. The Connecticut State Department of Children and Families' "[Safe Harbor Project](#)" supports LGBTQ youth and their families with links to legal resources, education opportunities, family support, hotlines, safe shelters for LGBT youth, advocacy organizations, and more.

## Time for Your Flu Shot

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) everyone six months of age and older should be vaccinated against the flu (aka influenza). Vaccination is particularly important for people who are at high risk of serious influenza complications. The CDC recommends getting vaccinated by the end of October. Learn more about the types of flu vaccines, myths about the vaccines, and where you can find a flu vaccination clinic near you on the [CDC's website](#).

### **Need Medical Advice? Don't Ask Alexa!**

We ask digital assistants like "Alexa" and "Siri" for baking times, weather forecasts, and etiquette rules. Why not ask them for medical advice? [A study conducted](#) by UConn School of Pharmacy, Northeastern University, and Boston Medical Center asked participants to pose medical problems to Siri, Alexa, or Google Assistant and determine an action to take based on the information the digital assistant provided, and found that 29 percent of those actions could have harmed the patient, while 16 percent of the actions could have resulted in death. The study's researchers concluded that patients should not act on advice provided by a digital assistant without further consultation with a health care provider.

### **Why Are U.S. Drug Prices so High?**

Americans pay more money for prescription drugs than residents of other wealthy countries. Why are our drug prices so high? The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health recently convened a panel of experts to shed some light on how drug prices are set in the U.S. Panelists described a broken system in which there is a disconnect between physicians who prescribe drugs and their patients who are unaware of the full cost of those drugs. Panelists also noted that the U.S., unlike European countries, does not negotiate prices with drug companies. There is not enough competition from interchangeable generic drugs, and drug makers find ways to get around programs intended to bring cheaper drugs to market. You can watch [a video](#) of the September 26 forum on the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health website. A [podcast](#) of the forum is also available.

### **Bill of the Month**

Do you have a puzzling or outlandish medical bill? Each month, Kaiser Health News and National Public Radio investigate, dissect, and explain a medical bill in order to shed light on U.S. health care prices and what you can do to avoid unpleasant surprises. **This month** they explain a \$56,603 bill for an air ambulance trip following an ATV crash.

### **Earwax an Unrecognized Health Risk for Older Adults**

Earwax, or cerumen, may be gross but it performs an important function. It binds with dirt, dust, and debris to clean and protect our ears. Earwax is not a problem for most people. However, in **30 percent of older adults** and persons with disabilities, it can collect to a point where it becomes impacted and blocks the ear canal. Up to **two thirds of nursing home residents** suffer from impacted earwax. Excessive earwax can cause ringing in the ears, hearing loss, and vertigo (which increases the risk of falling.) In older adults with dementia, hearing loss due to impacted earwax makes communication difficult and can lead to aggression and challenging behaviors.

### **Get Your Grocery Store Game Plan On!**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's **ChooseMyPlate** website offers money-saving tips and strategies for eating healthy on a budget while still pleasing your family's palates. You will find advice on weekly meal planning; understanding price tags and reading food labels; kitchen time-savers; tasty and low-cost recipes; and sample two-week menus.

### **More Health Information You Can Use:**

- New self-help guides on **Anorexia Nervosa** and parenting **children and teens with ADHD**
- National Prescription Drug **Take Back Day** is October 27
- Five mysteries of **breast milk**
- "**Sans Forgetica**" a new type font that aids in memory retention
- What do dietitians hand out on **Halloween?**

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