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FALL 2019
Surgery leads to a happy back – and happy retirement

Jennifer Van Berkum’s back was sending her a message: I’m done. The longtime nurse and doting grandmother was living with pain from her lower back to one of her knees. She also had pain in her neck. Van Berkum’s primary care physician referred her to Anthony Burrows, M.D., a neurosurgeon at Mayo Clinic Health System who sees patients in Albert Lea, Mankato and New Prague.

“Dr. Burrows spent what seemed like an hour with me on my first visit,” Van Berkum says. “He asked about my symptoms and did some neuro tests. He laid out some possibilities for what might be causing my pain, and said we’d need an MRI to be sure.”

When the results were in, Van Berkum learned her spinal cord and spinal nerves were being compressed in her neck and lower spine. She also had arthritis throughout her back.

Dr. Burrows explained Van Berkum’s options, which included surgery or physical therapy. “The majority of back pain and problems can be treated conservatively,” Dr. Burrows says.

Van Berkum decided to try conservative treatment. She started physical therapy, but instead of getting better, her pain continued to get worse. “Eventually, I could hardly walk,” says Van Berkum, who, at the time, was a nurse manager at Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato.

Van Berkum met with Dr. Burrows again for additional testing. “I told him I was getting ready to retire, and that I wanted to be able to play with my grandkids and travel,” Van Berkum says. “He told me his goal was for me to have a happy retirement.”

To help prepare her for that happy retirement, Dr. Burrows planned two surgeries. First, he would decompress the nerves and spinal cord in Van Berkum’s neck. Once she recovered, he’d fuse vertebrae in her lower spine. That procedure – called spinal fusion – creates stability in the spine and mimics the normal healing process of broken bones.

Today, Van Berkum says her pain “is 100% better than it was before. Surgery far exceeded my goal.” She credits Dr. Burrows and his colleagues for that success. “I had high expectations, and they exceeded my expectations,” Van Berkum returned to work after surgery, but has since retired. She’s enjoying time with her grandchildren and has been planning trips with friends and family. That all makes her happy, of course. And it makes Dr. Burrows happy, too.

“Young patients like Jennifer do so well after surgery is the most rewarding part of my job,” he says. “That’s why we all go to work every day: to make a difference.”

You can read more of Van Berkum’s story by visiting mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health. Patients can see Neurosurgery experts in Albert Lea, Mankato and New Prague. Call 507-594-4170 to schedule an appointment.
Whether they’re pounding, pulsing or piercing, headaches are a pain. Ingrid Chan, M.D., a Family Medicine physician at Mayo Clinic Health System in Fairmont, shares tips for taming — and possibly preventing — common types of headaches.

Know your type
“Not all headaches are the same,” Dr. Chan says. “Finding the right treatment begins with knowing the type of headache you have.”

The most common headache types are:
• Tension
  These headaches cause dull and achy pain. They may include a sensation of tightness or pressure across your forehead or on the sides and back of your head.
• Migraine
  These headaches cause severe, throbbing pain, usually on one side of the head. They’re often accompanied by nausea or vomiting, and may last up to three days.
• Cluster
  These headaches are sudden, severe and repetitive. The pain often is focused around one eye. Cluster headaches generally come at the same time every day for a period of time, usually from several weeks to several months. Then they stop for a period of time — months or even years — before striking again.

Common treatments
“There’s no one-size-fits-all treatment for headaches,” Dr. Chan says. “It may take some experimenting and patience to find what works for you.”

Options include:
• Over-the-counter pain relievers
  Aspirin, ibuprofen and acetaminophen may all do the trick for tension headaches and migraines, but they won’t relieve cluster headaches.
• Prescription medications
  A number of prescription medications can be used to treat migraines and the nausea that often accompanies them. There are also medications that can be taken to prevent migraines. Some of these medications also work on cluster headaches.
• Oxygen
  Breathing in pure oxygen effectively treats cluster headaches for most people.
• Vagus nerve stimulation
  Electrical stimulation to the vagus nerve in your neck may help relieve cluster headaches.

Prevention
“A number of lifestyle factors can impact the likelihood of developing tension headaches and migraines,” Dr. Chan says. “Managing those factors can not only help you avoid pain but also have other health benefits as well.”

Dr. Chan makes these headache prevention recommendations:
• Exercise.
  Aerobic exercise releases tension and stress, which can contribute to developing headaches.
• Get enough sleep.
  Aim for enough sleep — seven to nine hours for adults — and try to go to bed and get up at the same time each day.
• Limit caffeine and alcohol.
  Too much caffeine and alcohol can cause headaches.
• Know your food triggers.
  Certain foods, such as chocolate, aged cheese, processed meats and foods containing gluten, may trigger migraines.
• Stress less.
  Find healthy ways to manage the stress in your life. That may mean scheduling time with friends, taking a yoga class or learning to say no.
• Limit use of over-the-counter pain relievers.
  Overuse of as-needed headache medications, such as over-the-counter pain medications, can lead to rebound headaches, which can make the primary headache problem more difficult to manage.

“Don’t need to suffer with headache pain. There are options,” Dr. Chan says. “Reach out to a health care provider to learn about treatments for you.”

To print a headache tracker, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org/headache.
Pumpkin isn’t just for pies and lattes. The fall staple can be added to a host of foods for a tasty — and healthy — treat.

“Pumpkin is a great source of vitamin A, fiber and potassium,” says Nancy Olson, a dietitian and certified diabetes educator at Mayo Clinic Health System in Red Wing.

To get some of those benefits, use pumpkin puree in place of butter or oil in baked goods. Or try this easy soup recipe for a warm dose of fall flavor.

### Pumpkin Soup

**Ingredients**

- Servings: 4
- 3/4 cup water, divided
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 can (15 ounces) pumpkin puree
- 2 cups unsalted vegetable broth
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 cup fat-free milk
- 1/8 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 green onion top, chopped

**Nutrition information per serving:**

- 77 calories; calories from fat: 1 g fat (trace amounts of saturated fat; 0 g trans fats); 1 mg cholesterol; 57 mg sodium; 14 g carbohydrate; 4 g fiber; 0 g added sugars; 3 g protein.

**Directions**

In a large saucepan, heat 1/4 cup water over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until tender, about 3 minutes. Don’t let the onion dry out.

Add the remaining water, pumpkin, broth, cinnamon and nutmeg. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Stir in the milk and cook until hot. Don’t boil.

Ladle soup into warmed bowls, and garnish with black pepper and green onion tops. Serve immediately.

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Our Hometown Health blog is a place for you to get information and resources to improve your health and well-being.

Here are five recent posts that generated some buzz:

- **“Mental and emotional health assessment”**
  Many aspects affect your mental and emotional health, including worry, mood, sleep, stress, relationships and alcohol consumption. Take a few minutes to answer nine questions that will help evaluate your wellness.

- **“Kindhearted kid perseveres through multiple heart surgeries”**
  Matthew Makela is a 3-year-old who tucks in 20 stuffed animals nightly and gives his younger sister a kiss, hug and farewell at day care drop-off. He’s also a kid who had his first cardiac surgery at seven days old. Read about his congenital heart defects and watch a video of him run the bases at a local baseball game.

- **“What is a spinal fusion, and does it work?”**
  “Oh, my aching back!” If your back pain is caused by structural issues, and not muscle or ligament strain, find out what spinal fusion is and how you may benefit.

- **“Is Botox the fix for all facial wrinkles?”**
  Botox is a great treatment for some but not all facial wrinkles. Learn about other treatment options that can help restore a more youthful appearance.

- **“Over-the-counter prescription medication safety”**
  When medication is prescribed by a health care provider and taken correctly, it can help you with day-to-day life. But did you know that you also should take precautions with over-the-counter medications?
What should I say and how I can help a loved one that has a problem with drugs or alcohol?

Communicating with someone you love about a drug or alcohol problem can be challenging and painful. They often are in denial and may not recognize the negative effects their drug or alcohol use has on them — and on others. An honest, caring conversation may help lead them to get the help they need.

You first must ensure their safety. If they are showing significant withdrawal symptoms from alcohol, waiting for them to become “sober” could result in catastrophe. You can consider taking immediate action such as calling 911 or driving them to a hospital emergency department for evaluation and treatment recommendation.

When sober, let them know you are concerned about them and share specific examples that illustrate why. Tell them about destructive behaviors you have seen and the effects those behaviors have on them, as well as on family and friends. Maybe their drug or alcohol use has caused them to call in sick to work, putting their job at risk. Or maybe they’ve missed important family functions or their children’s events because of their use.

Then you can try to persuade them to get a comprehensive evaluation by a doctor with expertise in the area of addiction. Look for a board-certificated physician who specializes in addiction in the United States. The evaluation will assess the need for detoxification, the effects of the particular substances involved, cues to use substances, mental health issues and provide an effective treatment plan. They will need continued support from you, family members, friends and their health care team to remain engaged in treatment.

These are not easy conversations to have or easy steps to take. But they could save their lives. Lead with compassion in these conversations because addiction is a disease which can be treated. There is hope, and talking about the problem is the first important step toward freedom from addiction.

How is stress connected to my physical health? How can I manage stress in our 24/7 connected world?

If you’ve spent a day with cranky kids or been running late when you’re supposed to be at an appointment, you’re probably familiar with some of the ways stress can effect your body. You may have felt tight muscles in your neck, a pounding headache or pure exhaustion.

When you live with stress over a longer period, the physical effects are even greater. Today’s fast-paced lifestyles and 24/7 connectivity mean that many of us are experiencing stress on a near-constant basis. That means our body’s stress-response system, which is meant to act as an alarm alerting us to immediate dangers, is engaged all the time, releasing a constant flood of hormones that trigger a number of responses in our bodies. The release of adrenaline leads to increased heart rate and higher blood pressure. Surging cortisol leads to an increased amount of blood sugar in the bloodstream.

Over time, these responses can contribute to the development of many serious health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, anxiety and depression. That’s why it’s important to find ways to manage stress. Basic healthy living habits can go a long way toward managing stress — get enough sleep, eat healthy foods, and get some physical activity most days of the week.

Work on being present in the moment. Avoid constantly checking your phone.
Ways to keep your memory sharp

Everyone has a memory slip now and then. But those slips can become more frequent as you age. To turn back time — or try to — consider the simple activities to the right. Each of these activities may help slow memory loss and lower your risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias, according to Donn Dexter, M.D., a neurologist at Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire:

1. **Get moving.** Exercise appears to benefit your brain and your body. Active people are less likely to experience a decline in their mental function, and they have a lower risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease. Aim for at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week.

2. **Get your Z’s.** Sleep consolidates memories, which makes them easier to recall. Sleep also may clear abnormal proteins from your brain. Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

3. **Go Greek.** Following a Mediterranean diet — heavy on plant-based foods, whole grains and healthy fats, and light on red meat and salt — is associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

4. **Train your brain.** Exercise keeps your muscles strong while mental exercise keeps your brain strong. Do crossword puzzles or sudoku. Play bridge. Learn something new.

5. **Get social — and not just on your phone.** Spending time with others can ward off depression and stress, which can contribute to memory loss. So invite your neighbors over for coffee or take a walk with a friend. Volunteer at your place of worship or an elementary school.

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**BACK PAIN COSTS $100-200 BILLION annually with ⅔ being lost wages and productivity.**

**80% OF THE POPULATION** will have low back pain in their lifetime.

**25% OF THAT POPULATION REPORT** back pain in the past 3 months.

**DATA TRACK**

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**TREATMENT OPTIONS**

- Rest and activity modification
- Physical therapy
- Pain medication
- Spinal manipulation and chiropractic
- Steroid injections
- Surgery, in some cases
- Complementary and integrative health treatments (massage and acupuncture)
- Adult stem cells (experimental)
- Neurostimulation therapy, in some cases

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Download back pain graphic at mayoclinichealthsystem.org/achingback.

Source: National Institutes of Health

Get additional memory tips at mayoclinichealthsystem.org/64321.
When it comes to back pain, there’s good news and bad news.

“The good news is back pain is rarely a sign of something serious, and often relatively short-lived,” says Meghan Murphy, M.D., a neurosurgeon at Mayo Clinic Health System in Albert Lea and Mankato. “The bad news is that most of us will experience back pain at some point.”

What’s behind the pain?
Dr. Murphy says some of the most common causes of back pain include:

- **Muscle or ligament strain**
  Repeatedly lifting heavy objects or twisting your back quickly can strain muscles and spinal ligaments. Carrying extra weight can strain your back, leading to pain.

- **Bulging or ruptured disks**
  Disks — the cushioning between the bones in your spine — can bulge or rupture and press on a nerve.

- **Arthritis**
  Lower back pain often is caused by osteoarthritis, the most common type of arthritis. Arthritis also can lead to a narrowing of the space around the spinal cord or nerve roots, a condition called spinal stenosis.

Relief
Although you may want to head to couch when you’re hurting, continued light activity and stretching can help in recovery.

“You want to keep doing your regular activities and even light exercise,” Dr. Murphy says. “If activity makes the pain worse, back off a bit. Recovering from an injury means a gradual increase back in activity — listen to your body and make an effort to keep moving.”

Over-the-counter pain medications, such as ibuprofen, naproxen, acetaminophen might be enough to ease the pain. And, if your pain isn’t better after several weeks, Dr. Murphy says you may need to see your health care provider for an evaluation.

When to worry
Rarely, back pain may be a sign of something serious. Schedule an appointment with your health care provider if you have pain that:

- Follows a fall, blow to your back or other injury
- Is constant or intense, especially at night or when you lie down

Prevention
To prevent back pain, Dr. Murphy recommends:

- **Exercise.**
  Walking, swimming and other low-impact aerobic activities can strengthen your back.

- **Build muscle strength and flexibility.**
  Stretching your back and strengthening your back and core muscles can support and protect your back.

- **Sit, stand and lift correctly.**
  Avoid slouching, and sitting or standing in one position, for too long. When you have to lift something heavy, lift from your legs, not your back.

- **Maintain a healthy weight.**
  Carrying extra pounds strains back muscles and places extra pressure on disks and joints in the back.

- **If you smoke, quit.**
  Smoking reduces blood flow to the spine, which can keep your body from delivering enough nutrients to the disks and bones in your back.

“To the best way to avoid back pain is to prevent it by taking good care of your back and listening to your body,” Dr. Murphy says.
Posture check

Modern life seems to be conspiring against your better habits. You want to stand tall and sit up straight. But cellphones draw your eyes down, curving your neck.

At work, many spend their days staring at a computer, slouching rather than sitting at attention. Those habits can strain muscles and joints, causing body pain.

“Good posture is not just about the way you look,” says Andrew Jagim, Ph.D., director of Sports Medicine Research at Mayo Clinic Health System in Onalaska. “It can have an effect on how you feel in addition to impacting certain movement abilities over time.”

Find your healthy posture

Dr. Jagim shares this technique for finding your healthy posture: stand up against a wall with your upper back, shoulders and bottom touching the wall. Your feet should be a couple of inches away from the wall. Step away from the wall and maintain that position. “It will get easier over time as your muscles strengthen,” Dr. Jagim says.

Sitting strategies

Frequent standing is one of the easiest ways to protect against the harms of sitting. “If you work at a desk, try to get up at least once an hour,” Dr. Jagim says. “Walk to talk to a colleague or get a drink of water. While you’re up, take a minute to focus on your posture and do a few light stretches.”

Dr. Jagim recommends that your desk is set up to support proper body alignment.

Check that:
- Your keyboard is at elbow height, so your hands can rest on the desk.
- Your computer screen or laptop is at eye level.
- Your chair’s height allows your feet to touch the ground.

Cellphone tips

Dr. Jagim says that when you’re looking at your cellphone, you should hold it at eye level. “That way, you’re not bending forward and straining your neck,” he says.

To download more posture tips, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org/exercise.

Speaking of Health Series

Join Mayo Clinic Health System experts this fall for this popular health education series. Topics include neck and arm pain, stress management, and varicose veins.

Oct. 17, Nov. 21 and Dec. 21, 11 a.m.–noon
Vine Adult Community Center, 421 E. Hickory Street, Mankato.
Free. Call Vine at 507-386-5586 for more information.

Kidney Nutrition Class

If you or someone you know has kidney disease, these free sessions with a Mayo Clinic Health System dietitian will help you learn how to maintain your health with kidney disease.

Oct. 3, Nov. 7 and Dec. 5, noon–1:30 p.m.
Mayo Clinic Health System, Community Room, 101 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Mankato.
Free. Attend one or all classes.

Mankato Marathon

Proudly sponsored by Mayo Clinic Health System, the Mankato Marathon is a great way for you and your friends and family to get active by trying something new to improve your health. Events range from the KidsK to the full marathon.

Oct. 18–19
Fees vary depending on race and registration dates. Visit mankatomarathon.org for details.

Look Good Feel Better

This program is designed for women dealing with hair loss and skin changes from chemotherapy and radiation.

Fairmont: Nov. 11
Mankato: Oct. 8 and Dec. 3
Free. Register at lookgoodfeelbetter.org/programs/program-finder

Community Wellness Challenges

Businesses, organizations and people are invited to join Mayo Clinic Health System’s annual community wellness challenges taking place in communities around Southwest Minnesota.

Oct. 1–31
Fairmont, New Prague, St. James and Waseca
Free. Search the Classes & Events page at mayoclinichealthsystem.org for information.

For more information and other upcoming health and wellness opportunities close to home, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org and click on “Classes & Events.”