

WESTMORELAND COUNTY

AREA AGENCY ON AGING

INSIDE LINE

WINTER 2013

DON'T LET BACK PAIN GET YOU DOWN

Before you reach for that snow shovel this winter, think first about protecting your back. When you do battle with old man winter, or tackle any other kind of heavy lifting at home or on the job, do everything you can to reduce the chance of injury.

About 80% of the population develops back problems at some time in their lives. Back pain can range from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain that makes it hard to move. It can start quickly if you fall or lift something too heavy, or it can get worse slowly. Discs that sit between the vertebrae of the spine can rupture or break down. Muscles can strain or tear.

A wide variety of factors can increase your risk of back problems: getting older, being out of shape or overweight, having a job that requires lifting, pushing or pulling while twisting your spine, having poor posture, smoking and having a disease or condition that

causes back pain. Race can also be a risk factor. For example, African American women are two to three times more likely than white women to have part of the lower spine slip out of place.

You can help prevent back pain by standing up straight and minimizing the amount of heavy lifting you do. When the snow drifts beckon, or you must lift something else that's heavy, bend your legs and keep your back straight.

Exercising and keeping your back muscles strong are among the best ways to minimize your risk of back pain. Maintain a healthy weight or shed some pounds if you weigh too much. And maintain strong bones by making sure to get enough calcium and vitamin D every day.

If you do experience back pain, treatment depends on what kind of pain it is. Acute pain, which starts quickly and lasts less than six weeks, usually gets better without any treatment. Pain relievers can

help ease the pain until it goes away.

Chronic pain, which lasts for more than three months, is less common. Hot or cold packs may bring temporary relief but do not fix the cause. Behavioral changes, such as learning to lift properly and exercising more, can help in the long term, as can getting more sleep, improving your diet and quitting smoking.

Your doctor might recommend medications or suggest you try complementary and alternative medical treatments, such as manipulation of the spine, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (mild electrical pulses), acupuncture (thin needles used for pain relief) and acupressure (pressure applied to certain places in the body).

Most people with back pain do not need surgery, even if the pain is chronic. Surgery is reserved for situations in which other treatments don't work.

Back pain can also be a sign of many other medical conditions, including arthritis, pregnancy, kidney stones, infections, tumors and stress. That's why it's a good idea to see a doctor if your pain is particularly bad or lasts for more than a few days.

BREAKING BAD HABITS

by the National Institutes of Health

If you know something is bad for you, why can't you just stop? About 70% of smokers say they would like to quit. Drug and alcohol abusers struggle to give up addictions that hurt their bodies and tear apart families and friendships. And many of us have unhealthy excess weight that we could lose if only we would eat right and exercise more. So why don't we do it?

Scientists have studied what happens in our brains as habits form. They've found clues to why bad habits, once established, are so difficult to kick. And they're developing strategies to help us make the changes we'd like to make.

Habits can arise through repetition. They are a normal part of life, and are often helpful. We can drive along familiar routes on mental autopilot without really thinking about the directions. This frees up our brains to focus on different things.

Habits can also develop when good or

enjoyable events trigger the brain's "reward" centers. This can set up potentially harmful routines, such as overeating, smoking, drug or alcohol abuse, gambling and even compulsive use of computers and social media. Both types of habits are based on the same types of brain mechanisms. But there is a difference and this difference makes the pleasure-based habits so much harder to break.

Enjoyable behaviors can prompt your brain to release a chemical called dopamine. If you do something over and over, and dopamine is present when you're doing it that strengthens the habit even more. When you're not doing those things, dopamine creates the craving to do it again.

In a sense, then, parts of our brains are working against us when we try to overcome bad habits. And the brain's reward centers keep us craving the things we're trying so hard to resist. The good news is, humans are not simply creatures of habit. We have many more brain regions to help us do what's best for our health. Regularly practicing different types of self-control, such as sitting up straight or keeping a food diary, can strengthen your resolve.

One approach is to focus on becoming more aware of your unhealthy habits. Then develop strategies to counteract

them. For example, habits can be linked in our minds to certain places and activities. You could develop a plan, say, to avoid walking down the hall where there's a candy machine. Resolve to avoid going places where you've usually smoked. Stay away from friends and situations linked to problem drinking or drug use.

Another helpful technique is to visualize yourself in a tempting situation and mentally practice the good behavior over the bad. If you'll be at a party and want to eat vegetables instead of fattening foods, then mentally visualize yourself doing that.

One way to kick bad habits is to actively replace unhealthy routines with new, healthy ones. Some people find they can replace a bad habit, even drug addiction, with another behavior, like exercising.

Another thing that makes habits especially hard to break is that replacing a first-learned habit with a new one doesn't erase the original behavior. Rather, both remain in your brain. But you can take steps to strengthen the new one and suppress the original one. Research is exploring whether certain medications can help to disrupt hard-wired automatic behaviors in the brain and make it easier to form new memories and behaviors. Other scientific teams are searching for genes that might allow some

people to easily form and others to readily suppress habits.

Bad habits may be hard to change, but it can be done. Enlist the help of friends, co-workers and family for some extra support.

FIREPLACE SAFETY

Where there's soot, there may soon be fire.

Professional chimney cleaners say any soot deposits more than a quarter-inch thick present a fire hazard. The soot, called creosote, is one of the top reasons for the thousands of fires involving fireplaces each year. Creosote is flammable and should be cleaned out annually if the fireplace is used regularly.

- Have a cap installed at the top of the chimney to keep it from becoming blocked by birds, animals or debris.
- Use clean-burning wood. Hardwoods, like oak, burn cleaner than softwoods like pine.
- Follow directions when using manufactured fire logs. Use one at a time. Don't crack or break manufactured logs. This will release energy at a high rate, resulting in a shorter burn time. Fire logs create less creosote than wood.
- If the fireplace has glass doors, leave

them open while burning a fire log to allow air circulation and cleaner burning.

- Always use a fireplace screen.
- Keep a fire extinguisher on hand and have smoke detectors throughout the house.
- Use kindling to start a fire. Never use flammable liquid.
- When building a fire, place logs at the rear of the fireplace, preferable on the grate.
- Don't burn anything but wood in the fireplace. Never burn a Christmas tree.
- Keep the area around the fireplace and chimney clear of flammables.

GREEN GIFTING IDEAS

Here are a few green gifting ideas to consider during the holidays or any time of year:

- Give the gift of experience, such as event tickets, music or dance lessons, or health club, museum, or zoo memberships.
- Donate to the recipient's favorite charity in his or her name.
- Give a special home-cooked meal or bake the recipient's favorite goodies.
- Give potted plants, flowers, or trees that can be planted and

enjoyed all year round.

- Give the gift of time by volunteering at a charity, spending quality time with a loved one, helping with chores, or performing other helpful tasks.

INGREDIENTS OF HAPPINESS

What would it take to make you truly happy? In this era, extreme gratification seems like the only key to true happiness. But researchers who study happiness say external changes don't do much for your long-term state of mind. In fact, positive events such as losing weight or getting married cause only brief bliss that fades fast.

Real happiness comes from inside. Research indicates that true bliss comes from cultivating twelve distinct traits that enable you to navigate life's rough spots with greater ease, and feel content no matter the outcome. The best news is that you already have most of these qualities and it's just a matter of tapping into them.

- **Sense of choice** – People who describe themselves as autonomous and self-governing are up to three times more likely to be satisfied with their lives. When things get bad, they make the active choice to change

matters. Indulge in your favorite pastimes whenever possible and if you feel guilty, remind yourself that you will be able to face chores and situations with a more positive attitude.

- **Optimism** – Embracing all your life experiences, even the painful ones, with the knowledge that something good eventually will come out of them is what optimism is all about. Take stock of how past bad experiences may have benefited you in the long run. Approaching a potentially bad situation with an open mind primes you to see the upside of everything.
- **Proactivity** – Fire up your inner passion and try new experiences, allowing yourself to make one mistake every day. Exercising your curiosity has been proven to promote happiness by producing dopamine, one of the body's feel-good chemicals.
- **Humor** – Laughter triggers a spike in feel-good hormones like serotonin, while levels of the stress hormone cortisol drop. One genuine laugh a day is all you

need to lighten up about life.

- **Courage** – Stand up for what is important to you and the pride you feel will increase personal satisfaction. When your life is in line with your sense of right and wrong, you avoid falling victim to happiness-sapping self-doubt.
- **Purpose** – Having a reason to jump out of bed every morning is one of the most sustaining sources of happiness because it gives you something positive to focus your life on. If you're not sure what your purpose is, then your purpose is to find a passion. Start by engaging in small activities that light up your day and give you a sense of truly being you. Once you've discovered your passion, make a point to practice it daily.
- **Spirituality** – It reminds us that life may have bigger meaning, so we don't dwell so much on the little things. Religion also enhances both mental and physical health. Any soulful act, including meditation or singing, can help.
- **Love** – Having a sense of compassion for the people in your life and knowing that

you're cared for in return is one of the biggest predictors of happiness. Feelings of companionship provide a comforting sense of belonging that enhances overall life satisfaction. Share quality time with others, plan movie nights with girlfriends and enlist the company of others when you'd normally be alone.

- **Security** – Feel good about your current place in life. Security stems from the knowledge that who you are today is the culmination of all the little moments in your history that can never be taken away from you which instills a sense of grounding and inner peace.
- **Perspective** – Happy people mentally frame life experiences so that the good features of a situation is in the forefront, while the bad features are a fuzzy backdrop. Measure today's satisfaction against some of your tougher days, and you'll have reason to appreciate your life now.
- **Good Health** – The mind and body are connected, so taking care of your whole self is a recipe for happiness. The easiest way is to get

moving. Regular activity releases endorphins and increases levels of serotonin.

- **Altruism** – Giving without expectation is one of the easiest ways to feel good about yourself, your world, and life in general. Having a positive impact on somebody else's life generates feelings of goodwill that help minimize whatever negativity might be occurring in your own life.

PREVENTING FALLS AND FRACTURES

Osteoporosis is a disease that gradually thins your bones to the point where they break very easily. It works so quietly that medical experts sometimes refer to it as the "silent" disease. Older Americans, especially older women, are susceptible to this disease.

In addition to age, going through menopause prior to age 45, having abnormal menstrual periods and other conditions that reduce your estrogen levels are believed to increase your risk of osteoporosis. Other possible risk factors include: a family history of the disease, alcohol abuse, smoking, certain medications (cortisone) and inactivity.

Experts believe the best prevention for osteoporosis may be healthy

behaviors if you begin them early in life. Eating a proper diet, getting regular exercise, limiting alcohol and quitting smoking can help you strengthen your bones before age 35, when bones begin to thin.

If you already have osteoporosis, doctors may prescribe estrogen or calcitonin, two drugs which may slow bone loss. It's also likely that they'll recommend important steps to avoid falls, which are the major cause of bone fractures. Here are some tips to help you "fall proof" your home and lifestyle:

- Get regular vision and hearing checkups.
- Ask your doctor whether any drugs you take may affect your coordination or balance.
- Use a cane or walker to keep your balance on uneven or unfamiliar ground or if you sometimes feel dizzy.
- Wear supportive, rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes.
- Make sure stairways and hallways are well lighted, free of clutter and have securely fastened carpets and handrails.
- Make sure bathrooms have nonskid mats, nightlights and grab bars in or near tubs, showers and toilets.
- Living areas should have electrical cords secured out of walking

paths. Furniture should be arranged so it's out of the way, and of a height that is easy to get into and out of.

SENIOR CENTER NEWS

- Avonmore Senior Center will be hosting its Annual Polka Jam Fundraiser on Saturday, December 14, 2013 at Guys Tavern, 509 Westmoreland Avenue, Avonmore. There will be polka music, dancing, gift baskets and raffles. Food is available for purchase in addition to refreshments. Everyone is welcome. Call Karen Stonebraker at 724-697-4014 for more information.
- New Kensington Adult Activity Center located at 1039 Third Avenue, New Kensington will begin a Starter Line Dance Workshop on Friday, January 4, 2014. If you have never line danced or have not for some time this is the workshop for you! The workshop meets twice a week on Mondays 9-10 am and Fridays 10:30-11:30 am. Please contact Ray Heuser at 724-335-4102 with any questions.

NEW FROM THE FOOD BANK

Westmoreland County Food Bank now offers the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). The Senior Box Program is a federal program administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and Hunger Free Pennsylvania. Westmoreland County Food Bank is now able to provide food assistance to over 1500 seniors age 60 and older in Westmoreland County.

There is a designated date and time each month for distribution by each pantry of the Westmoreland County Food Bank. The box contains items such as cereal, shelf stable milk, canned fruits and vegetables, canned meats, juice, cheese and pasta.

To qualify you must show proof of: age (60 or older), Westmoreland County residency, and income up to \$1,245.00/month for one person household and \$1,681.00/month for two person household. If you think you may qualify, or have additional questions about the program, please contact Michelle Heller at 724-468-8660 ext. 25 or email

michelle@westmorelandfoodbank.org.

THE SENIOR'S FUND

Honor the memory of a loved one or celebrate a special occasion with a gift to the Seniors' Fund. You will support our mission by enriching lives of the most needy, and the honoree will be notified that a tribute gift has been received. All tribute gifts are tax-deductible and can be made payable to "Community Foundation of Westmoreland County – Seniors' Fund". Please send to the attention of Seniors' Fund Coordinator, Westmoreland County Area Agency on Aging, 200 South Main Street, Greensburg, PA 15601.

INCOME TAX ASSISTANCE

The Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) program offers free tax help for lower income, elderly and persons with disabilities. Taxpayers are reminded to maintain accurate records, bring this year's tax package, income, interest and dividend statements, and copies of last year's federal and state tax returns when they seek tax help. The tax locations were unavailable at the time of this publication. For more information, call RSVP at 1-800-262-2103 ext. 4213.

SUPPORTING THE TROOPS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

With the holidays coming up, many of our servicemen and women are away from family. Here are a few easy ways to thank those people

that keep us safe every single day, even if you don't personally know someone serving.

Send a Thank You Gift:

Give a personal thank you directly to the men and women serving the country. Even if you don't personally know any deployed troops, some retailers are making it easy to support the troops this holiday season by providing the names of active servicemen and providing a way to ship directly to them overseas.

Volunteer Your Time:

Show your appreciation for those who have helped protect our country by volunteering at your local VA hospital or nursing home this season, even if only for a few hours. You are sure to meet some fascinating men and women, and you'll bring holiday cheer to those who may not have many visitors.

Give Blood: It may not seem like it would directly impact men and women overseas, but giving blood through an organization like the American Red Cross can actually help troops hundreds and thousands of miles away. Military units may depend on rush shipments of blood during times of need, and maintaining an ample supply of all blood types is important.

Support Troops' Families:

When troops are deployed, they leave their strongest supporters behind. Someone in your area will likely be

without a loved one this season. Particularly during the holidays, it is important to remember the families of active duty service members in our communities. A plate of holiday cookies, a community event or simply a handwritten card could mean the world. Find a local family to support through an organization like Military OneSource.

WRAPPING GIFTS WITH STYLE

This year, before you reach for the usual old boxes and bows, rethink your wrapping routine with these simple, inexpensive ideas to help punch up every present. Not only will it surprise and delight everyone on your gift list, but you'll help set the tone for a holiday season they'll never forget.

Think Beyond the Box:

Hold the sweater boxes and wrap your gifts in more interesting packages. Items like baskets, buckets and tins are not only fun to unwrap, but they can also pull double-duty by being used around the house after the gift has been opened.

Keep It Under Wraps: Set aside traditional wrapping paper in favor of unexpected materials to make gifts feel even more special. Try wrapping presents in silver tissue paper, sparkly scrapbook paper or sheets of foil to create stunning style. For the crafters in your life, seasonal fabric makes a great alternative to wrapping paper; and those who love to

travel will appreciate gifts wrapped in repurposed maps and exotic newspapers. For close family members, children's artwork makes for original, whimsical wrapping paper that doubles as a special keepsake. Just have your kids draw, doodle or paint on brown craft paper, then use it to wrap presents. **Add an Adornment:** Amp up the wow factor of each package by adding an embellishment that doubles as an extra gift. Holiday ornaments, silk flowers and even pieces of costume jewelry will make each present a little more personalized and much more fun to open. Instead of ribbon you can also try tying up packages with leftover piece of yarn.

Play Tag: Repurpose last year's holiday cards to create gift tags that shine. Just cut a design or picture from the front of the card. Then punch a hole near the edge and use a felt marker to write your recipient's name on the back. Thread some ribbon through the hole and secure it to your gift for a quick and easy tag that's sure to stand out.

Ship and Surprise: In addition to all of the gifts you'll give in person this season, the holidays are prime time for mailing plenty of packages, presents and goodies, too. Everyone loves getting mail!

PA HEALTHCARE UPDATE

The following consumer alert has been issued from Governor Corbett and the Pennsylvania Insurance Department:

Now that the federal health exchange is online and has experienced well-publicized issues, scammers may pose as insurance agents or representatives of the federal government and try to sell fraudulent policies or obtain sensitive, confidential information.

Neither the federal government nor the state insurance department will be contacting individual consumers to sell them insurance. Do not give any sensitive information to anyone who claims to be with the federal government, your state insurance department or a navigator for the exchange.

Beware of unsolicited calls from scammers who claim to have your new "Obamacare" or Medicare insurance card and need personal information in order to send it. You are not required to obtain a new insurance or Medicare card under the Affordable Care Act. A legitimate representative will already have that information.

Here are some scenarios where healthcare scams could occur:

- Not using the appropriate website for the federal exchange. The federal exchange

website is www.healthcare.gov.

Don't trust any other website that asks you to enter personal data such as a Social Security Number, bank account number or credit card information.

- Callers posing as navigators or certified application counselors trying to "sell" you an exchange policy. A navigator or a certified application counselor can be an individual or an organization trained to help you learn about the available choices and guide you through the application process once open enrollment begins. These parties cannot sell you a policy, nor can they recommend a specific insurance plan to you. Navigators are certified and trained by the federal government.

Lastly, do not be misled or tricked into believing everything you hear. Here are some "lies" to watch out for:

- "Premium offer only good for a limited time." Enrollment in the exchanges will be open from October 1 to March 31, and rates for plans in the exchanges will have been approved for the

entire enrollment period.

- "You could go to jail for not having health insurance." Starting in 2014, all Americans will be required to have health insurance. You will not face jail time if you do not purchase health insurance. However, those who remain uninsured and do not qualify for any exemptions will face a penalty of \$95 (for each adult) or 1 percent of family income, whichever is greater. In 2015, the penalty will increase to \$325 per adult or 2 percent of family income, and in 2016 and beyond, the penalty will be \$695 per adult or 2.5 percent of family income.

The Insurance Department has an educational website, www.pahealthoptions.com, which focuses on health insurance questions and all coverage options. Consumers wishing to shop on the new federal exchange should use www.healthcare.gov. Insurance consumers with questions, comments or concerns can visit the department's website at www.insurance.pa.gov to check licensed entities and file complaints. They can also use the department's

toll-free consumer services number at 1-877-881-6388.

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