

ADVANCING HEALTH

WINTER 2019

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LETTER FROM THE CEO



The title of this publication, *Advancing Health*, is an important concept different from “curing disease.” Our mission at Nebraska Medicine is to do both, depending on the circumstances of our patients. But we would all agree that maintaining health is preferred. The magazine you are holding has several articles that discuss simple actions all of us can take to maintain and improve our health as we welcome

in the new year.

Our goal is to help you prevent diseases if it can be avoided. A top focus of prevention is limiting heart disease, the number one cause of death in the U.S. While dietary choices — smoking and lack of exercise — are the key factors in the development of heart disease, there are inherited genes that can affect the levels of cholesterol and other lipids in the blood, and thus increase the risk of heart disease. Dr. Kiran Gangahar leads the Nebraska Medicine Heart Disease Prevention Program, which is aimed at preventing heart disease by evaluating risk factors with advanced testing and then reducing the risk by using a combination of therapy and lifestyle changes. She talks about the program later in this issue.

While we all understand that the types and amounts of food we put into our bodies can affect the risk of heart disease, there are more complex factors at play. For example, the bacteria in our guts may affect the risk of heart disease. Evidence suggests that these bacteria, known as the “gut microbiome,” have a profound effect on many aspects of our health, as discussed by Dr. Alexander Hewlett, a Nebraska Medicine gastroenterologist. We are coming to understand that common problems such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes show how the gut microbiome affects our metabolism and can cause or aggravate diseases — including cardiovascular disease. This is a relatively new concept, unknown many years ago, when I taught sophomore pathology. I often suggested that there must be more we didn’t know about human disease. Today, I believe this is still true, proving the need for ongoing research. Dr. Christopher Kratochvil discusses some of the research programs that are ongoing at Nebraska Medicine and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. These include more than 400 clinical research studies and funded research in 2018 of \$135.6 million. This research is directed to better understand, prevent and treat disease, which advances health.

I hope you enjoy the articles that follow.

Sincerely,

James Linder, MD
CEO

Nebraska Medicine

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Clinical Trials That Enhance Your Everyday Health and Well-being

Research at Nebraska Medicine and its academic partner, the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), has accomplished big things.

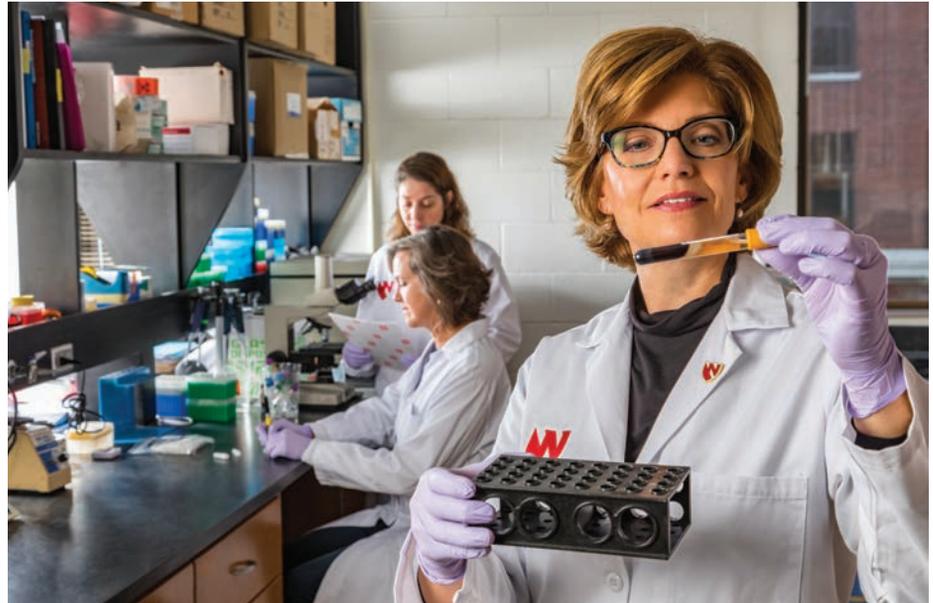
Due to clinical trials, there is now a new therapy for people with deadly recurring blood cancers that uses the body's immune system to attack a tumor. Other researchers were part of an international team that identified a tool that allows doctors to recognize sepsis infections before they become lethal. Another research team has made changes to an antiviral drug that is showing promise in treating and eliminating HIV.

When most people think of research and clinical trials, they often think of highly advanced drugs and treatments for complex cancers and other diseases. But research also provides valuable information and insight into everyday health needs, disease prevention and how to improve lifestyle habits and quality of life.

"Both types of research provide critical information on how to deliver the most effective health care during and after treatment for our patients here at Nebraska Medicine," says Christopher Kratochvil, MD, vice president of research at UNMC. Nebraska Medicine and UNMC are involved in both.

"The breadth of the research being done here is substantial," says Dr. Kratochvil. "All departments are actively engaged in research, from cancer and heart disease to specialties like dermatology and mental health. It's woven into the fabric of who we are as an academic health network."

Before a new drug, treatment or protocol is adopted by the medical field, it must first pass through rigorous testing — or clinical trials. Clinical trials determine how well new medical approaches work for people.



► Laura Bilek, PhD, PT, associate dean for research, conducts osteoporosis research with Kara Smith, MS, research project coordinator, and Molly Lang, MS, MT, laboratory manager.

Research funding at Nebraska Medicine/UNMC rose nearly 16 percent in 2018, to a record \$135.6 million.

A portion of that funding goes to finding the optimal dose of aspirin for people on long-term aspirin management for heart disease; ways to optimize bone density and health to prevent or slow the development of osteoporosis; how to best treat mental health issues, such as depression; determining whether smartphones can help rural men with weight loss; and the remote monitoring of patients with diabetes to determine more effective diabetes management.

The UNMC College of Public Health uses research and clinical trials to create new models for health promotion, disease prevention and public health policies that support community health efforts. One study is looking at community strategies to improve the physical activity of youth while another study examines the cause of lung

disease that plagues workers in hog farms and other agricultural settings.

"While we have numerous studies looking at new drugs and treatment models for various cancers, we also have studies that look at how we deliver care, outcomes research and quality of life after treatment," says Dr. Kratochvil.

One study is looking for new drugs to counteract the effects of radiation exposure for cancer patients.

You can opt in to be available for clinical trials if you are a patient here by signing a form during the admission process or by letting your doctor know you are interested. ❤️

» If you are interested in participating in clinical trials at Nebraska Medicine, such as these and others, a complete list is available at NebraskaMed.com/Clinical-trials.



Survivorship Clinic Helps Patients Transition to Life After Cancer

Cancer treatment can be a long and difficult journey. When it's all over, many patients feel overwhelmed and confused.

"It was a whirlwind of doctors, tests and treatments," recalls Robina Skovbo, who was treated for endometrial and ovarian cancers at Nebraska Medicine. "When it was all done and I finally had time to think, I didn't know what I was supposed to do next."

The Nebraska Medicine Cancer Survivorship Clinic is designed to help patients transition to their normal lives again. "We are here to listen, to develop a plan to meet each patient's unique needs and help them communicate these needs to their primary care doctor," says Rachael Schmidt, MSN, APRN, AOCNP, nurse practitioner at the clinic.

"After I met with Rachael, I had a wellness plan in place," says Skovbo. "We went over everything — my treatment, risk factors, possible long-term side effects, lifestyle changes I needed to make, how to reduce my future risk and signs to watch for in case of a recurrence. It was just what I needed."

Primary Care Clinic Expands Its Presence in North Omaha

The Nebraska Medicine Health Network continues to expand its primary care offerings in the Omaha area, with the newest clinic recently opening in North Omaha. Fontenelle is located just east of the intersection of 50th Street and Ames Avenue on the northern edge of the Omaha Home for Boys campus. This clinic replaces the former Fontenelle Clinic across the street.

Fontenelle is the fourth new primary care clinic Nebraska Medicine has opened in the past two years. All four are architecturally identical, designed to provide an extraordinary experience for patients. The three other clinics are Brentwood, Chalco and Elkhorn.

"This clinic is a wonderful resource for this community, our youth and our staff," says Jeff DeWispelare, president and CEO of the Omaha Home for Boys. "Both Nebraska Medicine and the Omaha Home for Boys have deep roots and a long-standing history of service to this community, so this was obviously a perfect fit."

In addition, the Clarkson Family Medicine clinic will move to a new home near 13th and Leavenworth streets in early 2019.

Nebraska Medicine has a total of 16 primary care clinics located in Omaha and other communities in Nebraska.



► Come See Us!

To schedule an appointment at one of our primary care clinics, call **800.922.0000**.



Lullaby Signals New Arrivals

The soothing sounds of a lullaby now fill the halls of Nebraska Medical Center and Bellevue Medical Center each time a new baby enters the world, thanks to a partnership with award-winning Omaha composer Matthew Mayer.

A short selection from Mayer's song, "Charlie's Lullaby," can be heard in the hospital cafeterias and common areas each time a baby is born.

"We love the comforting sound of 'Charlie's Lullaby,'" says Nebraska Medicine nurse manager Megan Armbrust. "Partnering with a talented artist who lives here in Omaha makes hearing that first lullaby an even more special experience for families. It's truly local."





Are You Up to Date on Your Cancer Screenings?

Preventing disease before it begins is the best way to stay healthy. Start your year off right by scheduling these important cancer screenings.

“Cancer screenings are the most effective tools we have for detecting cancer in its earliest stages, when it is most treatable,” says Julie Vose, MD, hematologist and medical oncologist. “Unfortunately, in many cases, cancer does not have symptoms until it has progressed to more advanced stages. Once cancer reaches more advanced stages, treatment is generally more complicated, you may have fewer options and treatment results may be less effective.”

Before this year gets away from you, review these cancer screening recommendations from the American Cancer Society to make sure you are up to date on your screenings.

If you have questions, talk with your doctor. Your doctor may recommend getting screened earlier if you have a family history of certain cancers or other risk factors. More or less frequent screenings may also be recommended, depending on your medical history. For more details about cancer screenings, visit cancer.org.

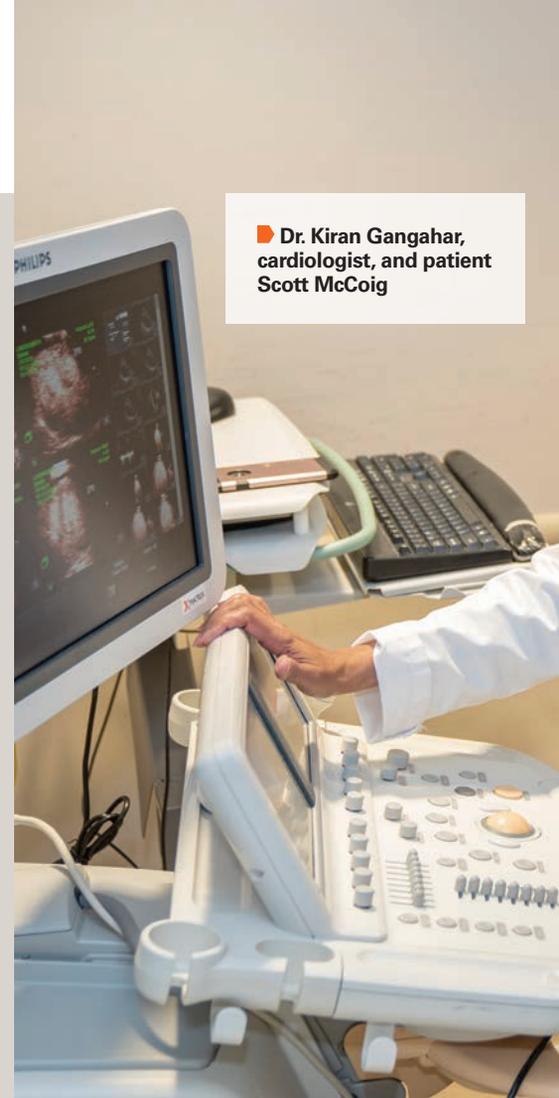
► Get it Scheduled!

Your primary care doctor can help you determine when you should be screened. Make an appointment. Call us at **800.922.0000**.

Type	Screening Test	How Often
Breast	Mammogram	Every year, beginning at age 45 until age 54, then every other year for women ages 55 and older. Some doctors recommend starting screenings at age 40. Discuss with your doctor.
Cervical	Pap test, HPV test	Women ages 21 to 65; frequency varies depending on age and risk.
Colorectal	Colonoscopy	Every 10 years, beginning at age 45 to 75; earlier or more frequently for high-risk individuals; ages 76 and older, discuss with your doctor.
Lung	Low-dose CT scan	Every year for current smokers ages 55 to 74 or for those who have quit smoking in the past 15 years and have a 30-pack history.*
Prostate	Prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test	Men ages 50 and older should discuss the advantages and limitations of this test each year with their doctors. African-American men or other men at high risk should discuss with their doctors starting at age 45.
Skin	Clinical skin examination	Regularly, as part of a cancer-related checkup, beginning at age 20.

* A 30-pack history is equivalent to a half pack a day for 60 years, one pack a day for 30 years or two packs a day for 15 years.

Getting to *the Heart* of the Matter



Dr. Kiran Gangahar, cardiologist, and patient Scott McCoig

When Scott McCoig's 65-year-old mother underwent six-way bypass surgery due to blockages of 85 percent or more to six of the major blood vessels to the heart, it opened his eyes to his own mortality. If family history played a role, he could be on the table next.

A visit to his doctor confirmed his concerns. His cholesterol was extremely high, and even more concerning, so was his LDL (low-density lipoprotein), the "bad" cholesterol.

"It was all kind of a shock," says McCoig. "I had no idea." Over the next five years, McCoig began a regimen of cholesterol-lowering medications, eating healthier and exercising more regularly. While his numbers did drop some, they remained at a level that put him at increased risk for coronary artery disease.

At age 40, McCoig found himself at the Nebraska Medicine Heart Disease Prevention Program, meeting with

cardiologist Kiran Gangahar, MD, who specializes in cardiac disease prevention and the management of high cholesterol and lipids.

After a comprehensive evaluation and heart tests, Dr. Gangahar suspected McCoig had a familial form of high cholesterol called hypercholesterolemia. This condition, which occurs in about 1 in 250 people, is associated with a genetic abnormality that causes very high levels of LDL cholesterol of 190 or higher. McCoig's was higher than 220. Normal is 100 and lower.

"People with this condition have high cholesterol beginning in childhood," says Dr. Gangahar. "This allows damage to the arteries to begin early and occur over a longer period of time, putting them at high risk for heart and vascular disease very early in life. Our goal is to identify these patients as early as possible so we can begin treating them aggressively and stop or slow the damage to the arteries."

To confirm his condition, McCoig underwent genetic testing, which identified one of the abnormal genes associated with hypercholesterolemia. "If the test is positive, we like to screen other family members as well since they are also at higher risk for carrying this gene," says Dr. Gangahar. Since McCoig began taking a cholesterol-lowering statin and another cholesterol-lowering drug called ezetimibe, and made lifestyle modifications, his total cholesterol has dropped to 156 and his LDL to 93.

McCoig's sister, Lorrie Robinson, is very happy she followed up. She, too, has been diagnosed with hypercholesterolemia and is managing her condition with a personalized prevention program developed by Dr. Gangahar. "I knew my cholesterol was high and that I needed to do something, but I hadn't been able to get it down until I started seeing Dr. Gangahar," says Robinson. She now plans to get her four children screened for the disease.

The goal of the Heart Disease



Prevention Program is to arm at-risk patients with the right tools to halt the development of heart disease. “We develop a comprehensive program tailored to your lifestyle and your risk factors,” says Dr. Gangahar.

The clinic treats patients who already have heart or vascular disease, as well as those who believe they are at risk for a cardiac event. Anyone can come to the clinic for a complete cardiac risk evaluation, but those with a family history or other risk factors for heart disease are especially encouraged, notes Dr. Gangahar.

“We use the most advanced cardiac diagnostic tools to get the most accurate estimate of your overall risk for heart attack and stroke,” says Dr. Gangahar. This includes tests like calcium scoring, advanced lipid testing, vascular ultrasound, 24-hour blood pressure monitoring and stress tests. The calcium score is assessed through a noninvasive CT scan of the heart that can help in

estimating your risk of developing coronary artery disease by measuring the amount of calcified plaque in the coronary arteries. The program also offers genetic testing and genetic counseling for a select group of patients.

“These tests allow us to develop the most effective plan to lower your risk,” says Dr. Gangahar. “We look at your overall lifestyle and then develop a plan to help you make the changes needed to prevent a future heart attack or stroke. Heart disease is a condition that can develop anytime over the course of your lifetime, and we are here to empower you to take control of your health.” ❤️

RISK FACTORS OF HEART DISEASE

- **SMOKING**
- **HDL**
HIGH CHOLESTEROL
- **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE**
- **PHYSICAL INACTIVITY**
- **OBESITY**
- **DIABETES**

➤ Stop the Development of Heart Disease
For a comprehensive evaluation of your risk factors and a personalized plan to prevent the development of heart disease, please call the Heart Disease Prevention Program at **800.922.0000**.

Bariatrics Center: Open

Jason Holoubek was sick of being sick and tired. At 41 years old, he was 330 pounds, and it was taking its toll. His reflux had become increasingly bothersome, sleep apnea was preventing him from getting a good night's sleep, and his knees hurt so badly he had maxed out on arthritis medications and cortisone shots. He

could no longer mow the lawn, play catch with his kids or do many of the things most people take for granted.

But that was just the beginning. When he went to his doctor to discuss a weight-loss plan, he was hit with a barrage of more bad news. His blood sugar was out of control, his blood pressure was borderline high and if he didn't do something about his weight, he'd need knee replacements soon.

It was the wake-up call he needed. "I knew it was time to get things figured out if I wanted to have any quality of life," says Holoubek. "I needed to close the door on my unhealthy habits."

Liz Fudge was facing some tough decisions as well. At 315 pounds, Fudge found the tasks of daily life challenging. Keeping up with her 3-year-old daughter, Darie, was nearly impossible. One day when she was playing with Darie and had to sit down to rest, Darie gave her a big hug and commented, "Look, Mommy, I can't fit my arms around you." The words stung. They hung with Fudge for days. Her weight was preventing her from being the mother she wanted to be. While she knew she needed to do something, weight-loss plans had never worked for her.

Holoubek and Fudge both sought the help of the experts at the Nebraska Medicine Bariatrics Center.

Holoubek met with Nebraska Medicine endocrinologist Namita Gupta, MD, and started with a medically managed weight-loss program. After six months, he had shed more than 50 pounds and gotten his diabetes to a manageable level.

But Holoubek's battle was not over yet. "I needed to lose another 70 pounds or more," he says. "I was still having issues with my knees and reflux, and I was concerned I would gain it all back."

"The whole team at the Bariatrics Center has transformed my life forevermore. I am humbled and honored by everything they have done for me."

– Liz Fudge

That's when Holoubek decided to try weight-loss surgery. "If done at an early stage of the disease, bariatric surgery can cure patients of diabetes, and it can be just the tool they need to help them lose that extra weight and keep it off," says Dr. Gupta.

"The staff at the Bariatrics Center put me in a position to succeed," Holoubek says. "I knew that I had to be committed to some major lifestyle changes even after surgery, and I was ready. I wanted my quality of life back."

Holoubek lost another 70 pounds after surgery and is completely off diabetes medications. "The success of the surgery depends on the after — staying committed to a healthy lifestyle and making good choices," he says. "I've conquered a lot of demons in the last year. I no longer have diabetes, my blood pressure is normal, I'm off my reflux and arthritis meds, my sleep apnea has gone away, I don't need cortisone shots in my knees anymore, I've stopped drinking, I'm eating healthy and I'm exercising regularly."

But the best part of all, says Holoubek, is that he can do normal things with his boys again, like playing basketball, backyard baseball and football.

► Top: Jason Holoubek with wife, Dawn, before bariatric surgery. Bottom: Jason with friend Kevin Armstrong after bariatric surgery.



Opening New Doors



■ Dr. Vishal Kothari, bariatric surgeon

While Fudge's journey started a little differently, the results have been just as extraordinary. After meeting with Nebraska Medicine bariatric surgeon Vishal Kothari, MD, the two decided bariatric surgery was the best option for her. Fudge was committed. She lost 10 pounds before surgery, and within a year she had lost another 100 pounds and is working on dropping 20 more. "I've never felt so good for years," says Fudge, smiling from cheek to cheek. "I bought a bathing suit for the first time in 25 years. The whole team at the Bariatrics Center has transformed my life forevermore. I am humbled and honored by everything they have done for me."

"I couldn't have done it without Dr. Gupta and the rest of the Bariatrics Center staff," agrees Holoubek. "Everything was seamless. They kept me on track, explained everything to me, and made me accountable with regular appointments and a monthly support group."

The Bariatrics Center is designed and directed by doctors who are fellowship-trained in medical weight management and bariatric surgery and are supported by a multidisciplinary team of specialists. The program offers medical weight loss, bariatric surgery and a meal-replacement plan.

"At the Bariatrics Center, we have



■ Inset: Liz Fudge before bariatric surgery. Right: Liz with Dr. Namita Gupta, endocrinologist.

many tools to help patients lose weight," says Dr. Gupta. "But we are looking beyond weight loss. We work with each patient to help them select the tool that is not only going to help them lose weight, but improve their health and quality of life."

"A lot of doors have been opened to me," says Holoubek. "It's like I'm living a different life." ♥

▶ Need Help with Weight Loss?

To learn more about the Bariatrics Center or to make an appointment, call us at **800.559.9500** or visit [NebraskaMed.com/Weight-loss](https://www.NebraskaMed.com/Weight-loss).

How to Make Charitable Giving Work in Your Budget

When people think of charitable giving, they often think it's something that needs to be done in large sums and therefore is only for millionaires.

But with a little planning, charitable giving is something that can fit into most everyone's budget, and it doesn't have to break your bank account.

"Every little bit makes a difference and is truly valued," says Lisa Anibal, director of the Nebraska Medicine philanthropic programs at the University of Nebraska Foundation. "When you pool all gifts together, it can do big things, like fund promising research, improve a patient's experience or fund new equipment."

Giving can provide personal benefits as well. "We have many patients and families who give because they find it helps them with the healing process; some find it gives them an opportunity to help future patients; still others give as a way to express their thanks and gratitude for their care," says Anibal.

And people who are able to give back experience a great sense of satisfaction, Anibal says. According to a study cited in the book *Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending*, individuals who spent \$5 on someone else reported being happier than those who spent \$20 on themselves.



► Lisa Anibal, director of philanthropic programs

Gifts benefiting Nebraska Medicine can be made in many amounts and forms — cash, check, credit card or planned giving through your estate, commercial, residential or agricultural holdings. A gift also can be made in memory of or to honor a family member, friend or caregiver.

What if you really want to give, but you feel strapped for cash?

Anibal suggests you sit down at the beginning of the year and decide how much you can afford to give based on your budget. Then make a monthly pledge. Many donors set up a monthly recurring gift on their credit cards or through payroll deduction. "When you do it this way, it is spread out throughout the course of the year, and most likely, you won't even notice the difference," says Anibal.

Charitable giving can also provide tax benefits. Tax reform at the end of 2017 increased the limitation for the deductibility of cash contributions as a percentage of



taxable income. Gifts of appreciated assets, like stocks or real estate, continue to provide a "double dip" for a donor by allowing a charitable tax deduction and avoiding tax on any capital gains that would have been realized if the assets were sold. If you are considering a gift of appreciated assets, be sure to talk with your financial adviser.

When you give to Nebraska Medicine, you can designate your gift to a specific area or an existing fund. Gifts can go into a general fund called the Nebraska Medicine Excellence Fund, which allows the funds to be used for areas of greatest need. Other existing funds include the Patient Assistance Fund, Child Life Program and Transplant Fund. The Patient Assistance Fund helps those who need assistance with everyday needs, such as lodging, meals, gas and transportation. The Child Life Program helps families understand the health care environment and develop age-appropriate ways to cope. Donations to the Transplant Fund can be designated toward a specific organ and are used to help support patients and families undergoing transplants at Nebraska Medical Center.

"No matter what you give, private support can help patients, families, clinicians, researchers, students and educators here at Nebraska Medicine for years to come," says Anibal. "You will be helping all of those who work at Nebraska Medicine in their effort to provide serious medicine and extraordinary care." ♥

» You can make a difference. Learn more at NebraskaMed.com/Giving.

Improving Your Mental Health

These days, our physical health garners so much attention that we can easily forget to take care of our mental health. Our minds can impact how we deal with stress, mood and, ultimately, our behaviors, says Nebraska Medicine psychiatrist John Franzen, MD. Dr. Franzen provides the following tips to help you improve and maintain positive mental health and well-being:

- **Eat a balanced diet.** Increasing evidence suggests that the gut and the brain are connected, and that what you eat can affect your mood, emotions and even depression. Eat a balanced diet of fruits, vegetables and proteins, and limit sugars
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise releases endorphins that help promote a positive mood and increased focus, and it helps reduce stress. Exercise may be as effective as antidepressants for mild depression
- **Appreciate the moment.** Research shows that mindfulness practices, such as meditation and yoga, can help with increased resilience, stress reduction, and improved mood and anxiety symptoms
- **Connect with others.** Social connection is vital to good mental health and has been linked with living a longer life, and it can be helpful during stressful times
- **Get enough sleep.** Sleep is important to recharge your energy level, and allows you to be more focused and productive, and to function at your best
- **Strive for balance in your life.** Planning your meals, exercise, mindfulness practice, and time with family and friends in advance allows you to be more intentional with how you spend your time and can promote a positive sense of health and well-being

Even with the best effort and intentions, you may still experience depression. Early warning signs include: mood swings, low energy levels, eating or sleeping too much or too little, and feeling helpless or hopeless. “The good news is that depression is very treatable with a combination of antidepressant medications and evidenced-based therapies,” says Dr. Franzen.

➤ Get Help for Depression

To make an appointment with one of our behavioral health specialists, call **800.922.0000**.

What’s the best way to quit smoking?

Thomas Klingemann, PharmD, pharmacist



It’s never too late to stop smoking. Even men and women who have smoked for many years can reduce their lung cancer risk five years after quitting. After 15 years, lung cancer risks can be reduced by 50 percent or more.

Smoking damages the lining of the lungs and the alveolar epithelial cells, which can cause lung diseases like emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Once you quit smoking, your lungs immediately begin the healing process.

The most effective programs are those that combine counseling with smoking-cessation aids to address both the behavioral and nicotine addictions. Nicotine replacements, like the patch and gum, are very effective, as is Wellbutrin, an antidepressant, and Chantix, a drug that prevents nicotine from binding to receptors in the brain, causing a person to get less satisfaction from smoking.

Many people are turning to electronic cigarettes. These are not an effective smoking-cessation tool because they still contain nicotine, and therefore they don’t break the nicotine or behavioral addiction to smoking. E-cigarettes also contain hidden chemicals that are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration.

➤➤ Need help quitting? Schedule an appointment with a primary care doctor. Call 800.922.0000.

How can I have healthier skin?

Ashley Wysong, MD, dermatologist



Good skin care habits can keep your skin looking healthy, delay aging and help prevent skin problems. Wear sunscreen year-round, as well as photo-protective clothing to reduce the development of wrinkles, brown spots and skin cancer. Don’t forget to use sunscreen during the winter months, when the sun’s rays can be even

more intense as they bounce off snow and ice.

A balanced diet with antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables can help your skin repair itself. Topical antioxidants, like vitamins C and A and Retinol, also helps heal damaged skin and reduce wrinkles.

Stay hydrated from the inside out. Drink six to eight glasses of water a day and apply a moisturizer immediately after showering to help lock in moisture. Avoid scented deodorant and antibacterial soaps, as well as hand sanitizers that include alcohol, which can be irritating to the skin and can remove natural oils. Limit your time in the shower and use warm water rather than hot. Smoking also damages the skin. Running a humidifier in your home can replenish moisture in the air. And cover up when you go outside to keep cold air and wind from drying and chafing your skin.

➤➤ To schedule an appointment with a dermatologist, call 800.922.0000.

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How Your Gut Affects Your Whole Body

The next time you're feeling down, instead of blaming it on the weather or a stressful day at work, look at what you're putting in your gut.

One of the main functions of your stomach is to store food until the gastrointestinal tract (gut) is ready to receive it. Medical experts have found that the brain communicates with the gut and the microbes (bacteria, viruses and fungi) that line your stomach, colon and intestines, affecting everything from your mood and emotions to sleep, metabolism and health, says Alexander Hewlett, DO, Nebraska Medicine gastroenterologist.

During digestion, these microbes make vitamins and send signals to the immune system, as well as molecules that can affect how the brain works. If your gut or microbes are not functioning properly, they can send signals to your brain, which can affect your mood and other aspects of your health.

We are still learning how the gut impacts your health and how it can be manipulated, says Dr. Hewlett. We do know that an unhealthy gut or one that is out of balance (called dysbiosis) can increase your risk for obesity and illnesses like diabetes, and can play a small role in depression and colon cancer.

Experts hypothesize that when the gut microbes are out of balance, your gut walls become more porous, which allows more toxins to enter into the bloodstream. There also appears to be an association with diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, fibromyalgia,

inflammatory bowel diseases and chronic fatigue due to the gut's effect on the immune system, says Dr. Hewlett.

For optimal health, it is best to have a diversity of bacteria in your gut, he says. This can be achieved through your diet and other lifestyle factors.

Eating better, exercising and being more mindful about eating foods rich in

probiotics are the first steps you can take to improve the health of your gut, and in turn, it will take care of you. 

► Start Your Year Right!

Schedule an appointment with a primary care doctor at one of our many clinics throughout Omaha. Call **800.922.0000**.



6 Ways to Boost Your Gut Health

1 EAT A WELL-BALANCED DIET

Include a mix of fibrous and leafy green vegetables, as well as omega-3 fatty acids, found in salmon, walnuts and chia seeds.



2 EAT MORE PROBIOTIC-RICH FOODS

Fermented foods, like sauerkraut and yogurts with live cultures, are packed with probiotics and can improve digestion; boost the immune system; and reduce gas, bloating and diarrhea.

3 TAKE A DAILY PROBIOTIC

Look for a probiotic that includes bifidobacteria and lactobacilli to strengthen your digestive and immune systems.



4 EXERCISE REGULARLY

Exercise promotes good bacteria by reducing stress and promoting endorphins.



5 REDUCE HIGH-FAT FOODS



Your gut doesn't like a lot of red meats and processed, fatty, sugary foods.

6 QUIT SMOKING

Smoking can disrupt the immune system and the gut microbiome.

