

New flu bug could bite work force

You're more likely to catch novel H1N1 virus, but the symptoms can be milder than seasonal flu

By Dave Schafer

Although bothered by a slight cough, 2-year-old Ivy Lopez was happily on her way to day care. Then, as she was getting out of the car, she vomited.

By the time she got back home, she'd spiked a fever that would eventually hit 105 degrees. "She looked very out of character. Her eyes were red and droopy, and she was lethargic," said her mother, Jeanette Lopez, a breast-feeding peer counselor with Health & Human Services.

Ivy's dad, Lee, called the doctor, and the next day they went in for tests. Before the results were back, Lee had the same symptoms.

The results confirmed what the Lopezes had suspected: Ivy had novel H1N1, also called the 2009 H1N1 strain, which was initially called "swine flu."

For the next week, Lopez took care of Ivy and Lee, as well as 7-week-old Violet.

"Ivy was handling it well," Lopez said. "It wasn't any worse than the seasonal flu. The media has

blown it out of proportion. It's just the flu. I just kept an eye on her and tried to make her comfortable."

According to health professionals, novel H1N1 symptoms might be milder than the seasonal flu, fevers might be lower, and the symptoms might not last as long, usually about five days.

"Any time you get the flu, it's a problem. But for a normal, healthy person, it's nothing to worry about," said Dr. David Persse, EMS physician director.

In June, the World Health Organization signaled that a pandemic of novel H1N1 flu was underway.

"We're starting to have a real big outbreak in Houston," said Dr. Melanie Mouzoon, managing physician of Immunization Practices and Travel Medicine at Kelsey-Seybold Clinic, in early September.

Researchers are still learning much about this new flu, which appeared in April. They know its symptoms are similar to seasonal flu: body aches, cough, runny or stuffy nose, fever, chills and fatigue. And some people also have diarrhea and vomiting, according



to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Stay home

If you get any variety of flu and are otherwise healthy, Persse said, stay home, sleep or curl up with a book, drink lots of fluids and take over-the-counter fever-reducing medicines. Isolate yourself from others and cover your coughs and sneezes so you don't spread the disease, experts say.

For the Lopezes, isolation was easy.

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Nobody wanted to be around them while they were sick.

“We were treated like lepers,” Lopez said.

Doctors can only prescribe Tamiflu, which has to be started within two days of the symptoms and will only shave about one day of misery off the illness, Perse said. However, some doctors might be hesitant to prescribe Tamiflu to otherwise healthy patients because there is a limited supply that needs to be conserved for those who need it according to CDC guidance.

People in high-risk categories should call their doctors right away if they start feeling sick. Those include pregnant women, children under 2, and people with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, asthma and heart disease, Mouzoon said. Also, people whose symptoms continue to worsen should call their doctor. (See box.)

While Ivy and Lee got the flu, Lopez and baby Violet did not, perhaps because Violet had Jeannette’s antibodies through breastfeeding.

Symptoms of the flu

Go to the doctor if you have the flu and see the following symptoms:

In children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing.
- Bluish or gray skin color.
- Not drinking enough fluids.
- Severe or persistent vomiting.
- Not waking up or not interacting.
- Not wanting to be held.
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough.

In adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath.
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen.
- Sudden dizziness.
- Confusion.
- Severe or persistent vomiting.
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and a worse cough.

But that appears to be a rarity.

Genetic shift

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus. It’s spread when people with the virus cough or sneeze in the direction of others or into their hands and then don’t wash them.

Influenza came in three types: Influenza A H1N1, and its variant, H3N2; Influenza B; and Influenza C. Influenza A H1N1 is not the newer novel H1N1, although they have the same surface proteins.

Influenza A H1N1 is the “seasonal flu” that humans catch each year and that changes slightly as it goes around the world. Perse calls that “genetic drift.” Usually, the new mutation is close enough to the previous year’s that people who get it one year can fight it off or get a milder case the next year. However, he cautions, yearly vaccination is still the best protection against the seasonal flu virus.

But novel H1N1, which formed when human flu, avian flu and pig flu mixed in a pig and then transferred to humans, is a “genetic shift,” Perse says. Because it’s a flu most of us haven’t had before, most people don’t have the antibodies to fight it.

The result: A White House report estimates 30 percent to 50 percent of Americans may get novel H1N1 flu. When more people get it, more people die from it and more people miss work. And that could have serious economic consequences.

Since spring, the city has been working on policies, procedures and responses to widespread absences, said Candy Clarke Aldridge, acting Human Resources director. Administrative Procedure 2-8, adopted June 19, was developed in conjunction with the city’s continuity of operations plans and instructs departments to prepare for extensive absences of any kind for any reason. The city’s concern is to follow



Photo by Jason Pickrell

Ivy Lopez, 2, left, caught novel H1N1 flu, then her father, Lee, right, caught it. The symptoms were no worse than seasonal flu, said her mother Jeanette, a peer breast feeding counselor, with newborn Violet.

public-health experts’ advice and keep employees who come to work from catching whatever’s going around. You can view AP 2-8 at www.houstontx.gov/adminpolicies/2-8.pdf. To see the city’s pandemic flu 96-page plan, visit www.houstontx.gov/health/Emergency/pandemicplan.pdf.

But, there’s one segment of the population that doesn’t have as much to fear, early studies show.

Age matters

More than 90 percent of the approximately 36,000 people who die from the seasonal flu each year, and about 60 percent of hospitalizations, occur in people 65 or older, the CDC reports.

However, early studies show people age 65 and older aren’t as susceptible to the novel H1N1 virus. The theory is those people were exposed to a similar virus in the past and still carry the antibodies to fight it off.

But that’s only a theory, and Perse cautions that it could simply be that older people aren’t around children as much and haven’t been exposed to it. About one in 13 novel H1N1 flu-related deaths have been children, and more than 80 percent of those were school-age children, the CDC reports.

As of early October, 40 U.S. children had died from the virus, according to the CDC. Two-thirds of them had epilepsy, cerebral palsy or other neurodevelop-

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Portrait of employees' wellness is not a pretty picture

By Dave Schafer

Pam Burch knows her numbers. She checks them every day in the Kelsey-Seybold wellness kiosk in the tunnel below 611 Walker, where she works for Human Resources.

Her numbers tell her she's prehypertensive and obese.

"Seeing those numbers reminds me that I need to walk more," said Burch, who uses the kiosk because it's convenient. "I sit at my desk all day. I know I need to exercise."

The kiosk offers a sample of city employees' wellness. And it's not pretty.

Of the more than 8,500 blood-pressure readings taken at the kiosk between January and August, only 21 percent were in the normal range. The same percentage was Stage 1 hypertensive, and 4 percent were Stage 2.

Forty-four percent of the 436 body-fat readings had more than 31 percent body fat, classifying them as obese. Body-fat readings are taken when a low-level electrical signal is sent through the hands. The time the signal takes to travel from the two connection points determines the amount of body fat.

Of the 1,565 body-mass-index readings, 31 percent were obese and another 39 were overweight. BMI is based on weight and height, which the user manually inputs. Only 29 percent were normal, and another 1 percent was underweight.

"Unfortunately, that percentage is a little high, but not terribly. That's where it's going nationally, which is shocking," said Dr. Courtney Sutherland, a family-practice physician with Kelsey-Seybold Clinic. "It really does affect your quality of life. Your knees hurt, maybe you can't keep up with your kids, or don't fit well in your clothes, or you

have the expense of shopping for new, better-fitting clothes."

You're not alone

Debbie O'Briant, Public Works & Engineering, uses the kiosk to check how her blood-pressure medicine is working. The kiosk reassures her that she is in the normal range.

High blood pressure, or hypertension, affects about 72 million Americans. People who eat too much salt, don't get enough potassium, and don't exercise enough are at risk for hypertension.

Age and genes also cause high blood pressure.

"Sometimes, you just can't prevent it," Sutherland said. "Stress is a big part of high blood pressure. And so is smoking and excessive alcohol."

Hypertension usually has no symptoms, but it can cause headaches and damage the heart, blood vessels, kidneys and other parts of the body. It can also cause penile erection problems, Sutherland said.

Pills can help control blood pressure, but some have side effects. And the more medications a person takes, the more complications they create.

One side effect of medicines can be added weight. Of course, many other factors play a role in two-thirds of Americans being overweight or obese, according to the journal *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*.

Genes can cause expanding waists, as can smoking, Sutherland said. Rushed people grab unhealthy fast food instead of cooking a healthy meal. People sit around surfing the Internet or watching television, or sit in traffic for a couple hours a day instead of doing physical activities.



Photo by Dave Schafer

Each day, Pam Burch checks her body-mass and blood-pressure numbers in the Kelsey-Seybold wellness kiosk in the tunnels below 611 Walker. They remind her to stay active to improve her health.

Being overweight or obese increases a person's chances of heart disease, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, cancer, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, gallstones, and stroke, according to the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute.

Moving beyond overweight into obesity increases a person's chance of developing those problems.

Overweight for an adult is having a body mass index between 25 and 30. Obese is a BMI of 30 or greater.

"People want a magic pill for weight loss, but there isn't one," Sutherland said. "Even pills or weight-loss surgery won't work if you don't change your habits."

Take charge with changes

Changing habits means doing the simple things it takes to have good health. It means resisting instant gratification.

"Self-control is a big part of it, and that's hard," Sutherland said.

Learning to deal with stress will help

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Important information about dependent coverage



Margaret Baptiste, Human Resources supervisor, addresses important information concerning dependent coverage. Do you have a benefits question? E-mail it to one of our benefits experts at hrenewsletter@cityofhouston.net.

- If the custodial parent of your children requests state-supported medical coverage, the Texas attorney general can issue a medical child-support order instructing the city to enroll the children in your health plan. If the enrollment changes your coverage tier, you are required to pay a higher biweekly contribution. If you do not have medical coverage, the state AG can require the city to enroll you and the children in the least-expensive medical plan, the HMO, and start deducting biweekly contributions from your paycheck.

The city must notify the attorney general if you stop coverage on the children or leave city employment.

- Newly acquired dependents must be enrolled in your benefits plans within 31 days if you intend to cover them. Otherwise, you may apply any other time, and their coverage is effective in the HMO on the first or 16th of the month after a minimum 90-day waiting period. You can enroll them in the PPO or dental plans only during annual open enrollment with coverage effective May 1. You can enroll in voluntary-life insurance at anytime, and it becomes effective after the life-insurance company approves the application. For dependent coverage, relationship documents must be submitted with the benefits change form.
- An ex-spouse becomes ineligible for coverage on the date the divorce is final. If coverage is not stopped, you may have to reimburse all premiums the city paid for the ex-spouse's coverage, and a new spouse will not be added to benefits plans. The plan will not pay claims incurred before the new spouse is covered.

You may designate an ex-spouse as your beneficiary for life insurance, but you must complete a new life-insurance-beneficiary change form after a divorce. Otherwise, the second primary beneficiary and/or contingent beneficiary becomes the beneficiary.

- Dependent children are ineligible for benefits coverage when they marry, become eligible for another employer's benefits, join the military, are no longer your dependent according to federal-tax guidelines, or turn 25. You must submit documents to stop coverage or risk having to reimburse premiums the city paid to cover the ineligible dependent.
- If you have a medically documented prognosis of death within 12 months, you may apply to receive the life-insurance accelerated death benefit, a lump-sum payment of 75 percent of your basic and voluntary-life insurance. You will continue to pay premiums to retain the remaining 25 percent.

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lower blood pressure, Sutherland said.

A balanced diet helps people attain an optimum weight, said Doug Earle, deputy director, Parks & Recreation and chairperson of the Employee Wellness Advisory Committee. Fat should be no more than 20 percent of your daily intake, and you should eat lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy and lean meats.

"Limit or eliminate fried foods," he said. That's easy to do if you follow his next tip: Avoid fast-food restaurants. Instead, go to a restaurant that has healthy options or order a salad with low-calorie dressing.

Bring a turkey sandwich, yogurt and water for lunch. That's fewer calories and less money spent.

The key to losing weight is to expend more calories than you take in, Earle said. That means: get moving.

At least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise each day will help you maintain your weight. More exercise, and you start losing weight. Exercise doesn't have to be a chore, Earle said. You can swim, bicycle, dance, play tennis, anything that's fun and makes you move.

For city employees, Parks' community centers are free, and they offer programs for those who want to work up a sweat. (See story in Summer 2009 Benefits Pulse.) The city is also hosting a free Metabolic Syndrome Program to help employees slim down and learn to live healthier lifestyles.

Walking is good, as long as you don't stroll. Remember, your pace needs to be moderate to vigorous. Walking can also be done with a pal. And, it's cheap and easy, and all you need is a pair of shoes and socks.

Burch walks for 30 minutes outside during her lunch break. But people who use the kiosk can walk in the tunnels that connect downtown buildings.

There are walking trails all around the city, Earle said. During the hot summer months, you may need to walk in the evening or early morning.

Nicole Hare, city wellness manager, is creating a twice-weekly after-work walking program and a twice-weekly after-work aerobics program at 611 Walker and at 3000 N. Stadium Dr. That's four days a week for city employees to melt away the pounds together. (See Wellness Connection on page 5 for more information.)

Departments are creating wellness initiatives, Hare said. And the city is encouraging employees to join the 50 Million Pound Challenge, in which participants get access to free online resources and win monthly prizes.

Whatever you choose, doing something is better than doing nothing, Earle said.

"Many chronic diseases could be significantly decreased or eliminated if people did these things," he said. 

Wellness Champion

Analyst enjoys fruit of diet changes – disappearing pounds and proving his nutritionist wrong



Jeffery Floyd, Health & Human Services, started eating smaller portions more often to cut down on calories. He's lost 27 pounds.

In February, Jeffery Floyd's nutritionist gave him a stern talk. At 290 pounds, he hadn't been taking care of himself. And that's a bad idea for someone with Type 2 diabetes.

As she was telling him to eat smarter and eat smaller portions more often, she sounded skeptical, Floyd said. She sounded like she thought the talk was pointless.

"That made me mad," he said. He had already decided he needed to take better care of himself and lose weight. He left the office determined to do better just to show his nutritionist.

That was his negative reinforcement. He already had positive reinforcement: his 4-year-old twins. "I want to be around to see them grow up," said Floyd, a Health & Human Services management analyst.

So he changed what and how much he ate, and he's lost 27 pounds.

It's not a strict diet, he said. He cut down on portions sizes, and he eats six times a day. He started eating breakfast to get his metabolism going and drinking more water. For lunch, he eats a submarine sandwich or salad.

Eating a midmorning snack of fruit means he's less hungry at lunch. Before, he'd skip breakfast and load up on calories at lunch.

Also, Floyd has cut back on fried food. Now, he has it just once a month.

Several months into his program, Floyd joined the 50 Million Pound Challenge, a nationwide program that brings people together to help each other take control of their health by getting fit. He gets shopping lists from the program, and he's lost six pounds during the challenge. When he posts his weight-loss numbers, he gets an encouraging e-mail praising him for losing weight.

"I know it's the same message everyone gets," Floyd said, "but I like getting it. It makes me feel good."

His goal is to get down to 200 pounds. Soon, he'll make time for exercise.

Until then, he'll continue to focus on what he eats. That's worked pretty well so far. 

Wellness Connection

Nicole Hare, wellness manager, connects you with new wellness classes



Get a jumpstart to a healthier you by making some basic lifestyle changes. The Wellness Connection can help you eat fewer calories, manage stress, exercise and stop smoking with these fun, interactive programs.

We've got biweekly blood-pressure screenings from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays at 611 Walker and 1200 Travis. Starting Nov. 2, a Monday walking group of city employees and community members will meet at 611 Walker in the atrium and walk to Discovery Green Park and back.

Also, join the Get Moving Houston 50 Million Pound Challenge team for online resources and tools to support your physical activity and nutritional goals. The 50 Million Pound Challenge is a nationwide program that brings people together to help each other take control of their health. You'll get access to weekly grocery lists, nutritional planning, and exercise logs. To join, visit 50millionpounds.com and click on "teams" in the upper right corner. Click on search and type in "Get Moving Houston," then click on "Join team."

Early in the new year, introduce two new programs: an eight-week nutritional-education seminar. Watch your e-mail for location, time and more information; and, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 30-minute aerobics classes at 8000 N. Stadium Drive and another to-be-determined location. The classes will mix cardiovascular, strength building and flexibility. You bring a towel, shoes, exercise mats and weights 10 pounds and under. We'll supply the water.

As you can see, Wellness Connection can help make reaching your wellness goals as simple as one, two, three, four. If you're interested in participating in a Wellness Connection program, e-mail your name and phone number to wconnection@cityofhouston.net.

Family Wellness Day

3rd Annual

Come have fun with your co-workers ... and get trimmer, to boot. The third annual Family Wellness Day features free wellness screenings, discounted tickets to the zoo and surrounding museums, and fitness and cooking demonstrations.

Hermann Park
10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Nov. 14

For more information,
call 713-794-9041.

Grabbing on to more years

Preventing home injuries can extend seniors' lives



By Andrew Guy Jr.

"I've fallen, and I can't get up!"

Remember?

The phrase was uttered in a 1980s commercial by an actress playing a senior citizen. She had fallen to the floor in the bathroom and needed help.

It was not meant to be funny. But the over-acting in that 30 second spot became a worldwide sensation and is still talked about today.

Behind the unintentional comedy of that spot, however, lay a dark truth: Senior citizens living alone are often at risk for serious injury without realizing it. Many do not have emergency pendants, call buttons or grab bars. They do not have the access to help if they need it, nor do they know the types of help available.

Researchers at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia have an answer: Make simple modifications to senior citizens' homes. Doing so can add as much as 3.5 years to their lives.

Needing a little help

"I'll never forget the moment I saw those numbers on mortality," said Laura Gitlin, director of the Jefferson Center for Applied Research on Aging and Health at Thomas Jefferson University. "I said, 'This is unbelievable. We need to stay on top of this.'"

Gitlin's study took 319 people age 79 and older and divided them into two groups, the intervention group and the control group.

Intervention group members received personal visits and phone calls from a therapist. The therapist checked their medical and emotional needs and asked about their physical living conditions. If needed, the therapist modified their homes and taught them to move around better.

Those in the control group received no help at all.

Participants were followed for four years.

The study focused on senior citizens living alone in urban environments. Gitlin said the injury and mortality problem could be compounded for seniors living in a rural community where they're less likely to have access to help.

According to The American Geriatrics Society, by 2030 the number of adults 65 and older will nearly double to 70 million. Twenty percent of the current Medicare population has at least five chronic conditions. Older adults are now living longer with chronic issues.

Another potential problem is that seniors living alone may be reluctant to tell a friend, family member or physician they are having trouble getting out of a bathtub or walking across a room. They may be embarrassed, or may not think it's important.

"People who are aging are experiencing things that often come just under the radar of a physician," Gitlin said. "This represents a huge clinical issue that any clinical therapist should recognize, and that anyone with aging parents should recognize. But the problem is that sometimes we just don't know what they're going through."

The reality is that daily functional abilities are indeed very big issues that must be addressed as soon as they arise, said Dr. Rick Watson, associate medical director of Texas HealthSpring and a

practicing osteopathic physician.

Texas HealthSpring also offers home safety evaluations to patients that request it.

More than 90 percent of hip fractures among adults 65 and older are caused by falls, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 1990, researchers estimated that hip fractures would exceed 500,000 by 2040. About one out of five hip fracture patients die within a year of their injury.

Stopping the spill

"Fall prevention is the number one issue facing the elderly," Watson said. "And hip fracture is the greatest safety risk. You don't want floors to be slippery, and you don't want transitions between rugs and flooring to be complicated. Small things like that are a big concern. An issue with the floor for a young person isn't likely to be a problem, but for an older person, they may walk a little slower and shuffle their feet a bit. That makes it harder for them to navigate."

Dr. Patrick Carter, chief of family medicine at Kelsey-Seybold Clinic, added that not every senior has issues with functionality. Many are as robust and energetic as a younger person.

Indeed, a trip to almost any fitness club will reveal seniors who are just as active as those in their 20s. The city's Texas HealSpring Medicare Advantage plan has the Silver Sneakers program, which provides seniors with access to health clubs and classes specifically designed for seniors. There is also full use of fitness equipment.

Seniors should stay active any way that they can, doctors say. Exercises can improve balance, posture and strength that often do not require a gym membership. Chin, neck and shoulder exercises, for example, can improve posture.

Carter said more than 50 percent of his patients are over 65. He said there are many basic things we overlook that could be harmful to a senior citizen.

"For example, if there are stairs, keep clutter off the stairs," Carter said. "And put high visibility tape on each stair so a person can easily see them. And make sure the stair area is well lit." 

Important Medicare Information

Open enrollment for Medicare Advantage and Medicare Part D prescription drug plans begins in mid-November. If you are enrolled in a city medical plan, you already have a prescription drug plan that is equivalent to or better than Medicare D plans. **You should not enroll in another Medicare Part D prescription drug plan.** City medical plans are HMO, PPO, Aetna PFFS, TexanPlus HMO, and Texas HealthSpring HMO.

Some individually purchased MA plans do not require retirees to pay a monthly premium, have lower copayments than the city's plans, and have

different prescription drug benefits. If you enroll in another MA plan, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will remove you from the city's MA plan and **you will lose your eligibility to re-enroll in a city medical plan.** The CMS cannot remove you from the HMO and PPO. However, your enrollment in another MA plan may cause the city to lose some funding for your prescription drugs under the Federal Retiree Drug Subsidy Program.

You should receive your city MA plans enrollment packet by Thanksgiving. The packet will include your medical plan options for Jan. 1, 2010, and a schedule of meetings where you can get more information. Elections you make in December are effective Jan. 1. We anticipate offering some new options.

Retirees' dependents are not covered under the city's life-insurance plan, even

if they are enrolled in medical and dental coverage. If a dependent dies before you, you must notify the city so your contribution for coverage can be adjusted. Premium reimbursements are limited to

payments made for two months. You may also name a new beneficiary.

If you or covered dependents are retired and eligible for Medicare, you must enroll in

...you must enroll in Medicare to receive most benefits from the city plans.

Medicare to receive most benefits from the city plans. Medicare designates January through March as the enrollment period for people who did not enroll in Medicare when they became eligible. Coverage will be effective July 1.

Employees who are eligible for Medicare but continue working and are covered under the city's health plan are not required to enroll in Medicare. There is no penalty for your delayed enrollment if you are still working.

Some tips to keep you movin'

Baby boomers are not as young as they used to be, and while exercise is just as important as ever, certain precautions are necessary to stay injury-free.

Last year, 166,000 people between 45 and 64 needed medical help for injuries related to exercise and exercise equipment. The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons offers the following suggestions to help keep boomers and others out of the emergency room:

- Before starting an exercise program, your doctor should check your heart and body and make recommendations based on your age and fitness level.
- Stretch and do three to five minutes of light exercise to warm up before exercising.
- For maximum benefit, daily moderate exercise is better and less likely to cause injury than overdoing it on weekends. Listen to your body and rest or change your workout to meet your physical condition.

- Get a balanced, total body workout by mixing in cardio, strength and flexibility training. This will also help prevent injuries from overuse. Introduce changes to your routines, such as new exercises, gradually and take lessons when possible to learn proper form and technique.
- Take calcium and vitamin D supplements daily to help keep bones strong and healthy.

Have a reason to live and live longer

Have a reason to get out of bed in the morning? If not, start a new hobby.

People who have a purpose in life live longer, according to a new study of 1,238 older adults. The study was conducted by Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center, the Rush Memory and Aging Project, and the Minority Aging Research Study. The participants did not have dementia and averaged 78 years old.

Participants with a higher sense of purpose had about half the risk of dying during the follow-up period than those

with a lower sense of purpose. That was true even after controlling for such factors as depressive symptoms, chronic medical conditions and disability.

Proud of your fitness? Tell us about it

Benefits Pulse is looking for several physically and mentally fit retirees to tell us what they do to keep their edge. Here's your chance to teach others your health and wellness secrets. What can other retirees learn from you? What can youngsters learn? What do you wish you'd done differently? If you want to be a part of this story, please call Dave Schafer at 713-827-9386.

Health Notes

Benefits news
retirees can use

Healthy Eating

Creamy fruit dessert

Ingredients:

- 4 ounces fat-free cream cheese, softened
- 1/2 cup plain fat-free yogurt
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 1/2 tsp. vanilla
- 1 can (11 ounces) mandarin oranges, drained
- 1 can (8.25 ounces) water-packed sliced peaches, drained
- 1 can (8 ounces) water-packed pineapple chunks, drained
- 4 tbsp. shredded coconut, toasted



Nutritional information per serving

- Calories 145
- Total fat 2 g
- Saturated fat 2 g
- Carbohydrates 26 g
- Protein 7 g
- Cholesterol 3 mg
- Fiber 2 g
- Sodium 190 mg

Directions:

In a small bowl, combine the cream cheese, yogurt, sugar and vanilla. Using an electric mixer on high speed, beat until smooth. In a separate bowl, combine the oranges, peaches and pineapple. Add the

cream cheese mixture and fold together. Cover and refrigerate until well chilled. Transfer to a serving bowl or individual bowls. Garnish with shredded coconut and serve immediately. Serves 4.

Dietitian's tip: Mandarin oranges have about 40 percent less vitamin C than oranges do, but they have nearly three times the vitamin A.

– Source: MayoClinic

Sudoku

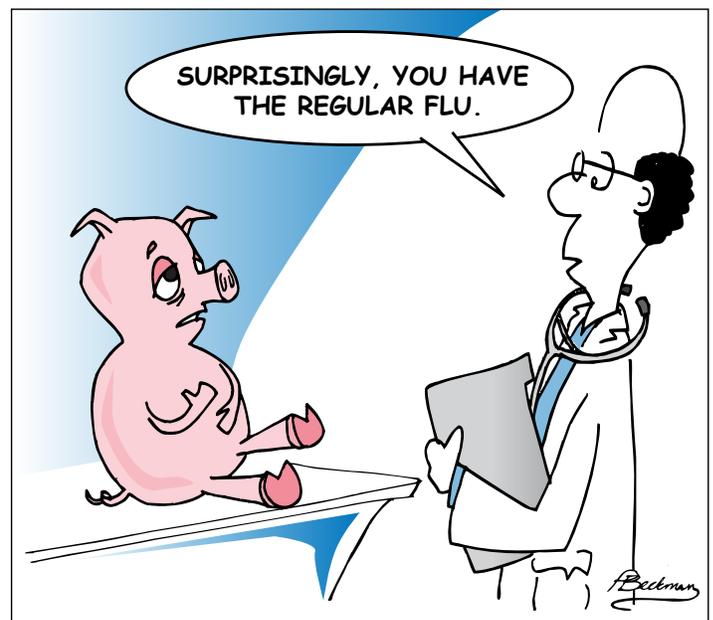
for brain health

	7	9	6	4			1	8
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Complete the grid so that every row, column and 3x3 box contain every letter in the phrase LO NUMBERS. Answer key can be found online at www.benefitspulse.org or on page 11

Drawing Conclusions

by Paul Beckman



Mama was right: Get outside

Forget bugs, humidity and rain. Being outside is more relaxing than we think

By Andrew Guy Jr.

Maria Garcia loves her job, but loves leaving it more. Leaving it means that she gets to go home, grab her 13-year-old lab-mutt mix, Roc Star, and go for a long, brisk walk. As she unwinds, she does some blue-sky thinking about whatever pops into her mind.

These daily walks are her refuge, the time when she can zone. Doesn't matter if it's hot, humid or if the ozone levels are off the charts. Allergy reports are irrelevant. Rain? Please. In her words: "It's just water. You won't melt."

"Connecting with nature calms me down and helps me appreciate life," said Garcia, an IMLS (Institute for Museum and Library Services) project coordinator at Central Library. "You know when you're relaxed, you're able to think better, and you're able to make better decisions and be more connected with yourself."

That is true.

Researchers have found that being outside goes deeper than a temporary escape. Nature helps people unwind. Taking long walks, running with a pet, hiking through the woods and lying on a beach can help people focus and add to their creativity and problem solving abilities. Trees and nature are more calming than urban hustle and bustle, researchers said.

"You don't hear people saying, 'I'm so exhausted from looking at that beautiful waterfall' or 'I'm tired from watching that interesting movie,'" said Marc Berman, a graduate student at the University of Michigan who recently completed a study examining the issue.

Berman conducted two experiments. In one, he randomly assigned people to take a walk either through a secluded, tree-lined arboretum near campus or through busy Downtown Ann

Arbor. The walks were predefined and were equal at 2.8 miles.

When participants returned, Berman tested their attention spans by having them repeat digit sequences backwards. He found that those who walked through the arboretum scored significantly better when repeating the numbers.

In the second experiment, participants were shown photographs of either urban areas or nature. Participants who viewed nature photographs rated them more refreshing than those of cities.

Berman said there are generally two kinds of attention: involuntary and directed. Involuntary attention, loud noises, bright lights and traffic, for example, command us to pay attention.

"But we control directed attention," Berman said. "We decide which path to take while walking through the woods, or we decide how long to watch the sunset.

"Directed attention is better for our cognitive development because we're letting our minds wander to where they want to go," Berman said.

"It's a powerful example that you don't need to go to Yosemite in order to feel relaxed," Berman said.

Yosemite may not be necessary, but it helps. Physically getting out of one's environment and interacting with nature remains the best way to unwind, Berman said. A shot of a sunset as a screensaver is fine, but isn't enough.

Jan Stein, director of the Holo Institute, a San Francisco nonprofit counseling and education center, said the restorative benefits of nature are best achieved via physical contact.

"A lot of people are simply disembodied, even on a daily basis," Stein said. "They're not connecting with their



Photo by Andrew Guy Jr.

Maria Garcia, an Institute for Museum and Library Services project coordinator at Central Library, walks her dog, Roc Star, on a daily basis. Garcia says the walks help her relax and make better decisions. Researchers agree.

feelings. Even people who use talk therapy. They're sitting in a chair and talking about their feelings, but they're not really in touch with their bodies and what they're physically experiencing."

If you're out on a long, relaxing hike, and you see a nice tree you feel connected to, it's important to relax and interact with that tree and the surroundings," Stein said. "It may sound unusual, but there is something to be said for interacting with nature."

Of course, precautions have to be taken for each individual. Someone with allergies shouldn't wander outside unprepared. They should take allergy medication first or check an online Web site like pollen.com to monitor pollen counts.

Brad Hendricks, an urban forester in Parks & Recreation, spends a lot of time outside. After all, he inspects thousands of trees in Houston's parks and in city neighborhoods.

He loves being outside. But if he sits still for longer than 30 minutes, his

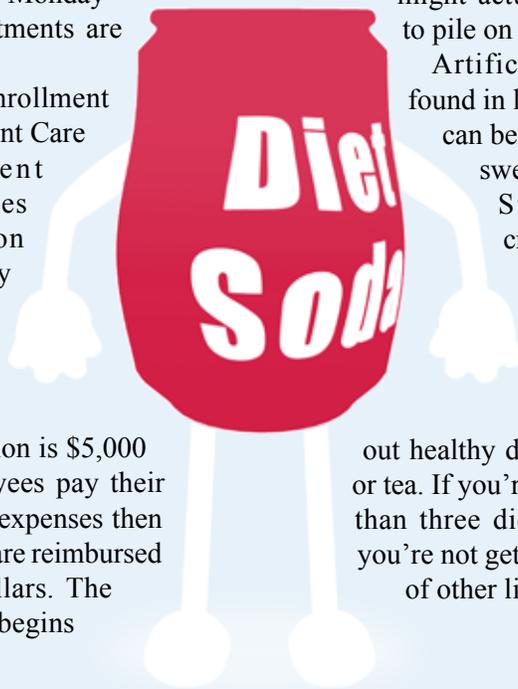
See **NATURE** on page 11

Just so You Know

Benefit news you can use

Can your dependent get benefits? It depends

- Stepchildren may be covered under your city benefits plans only if they live with you.
- Life-insurance benefits cannot be paid to minor children. Payments for a minor child must be paid to a trust for that child, unless other instructions are left in a will. At 18, the beneficiary can draw from the trust.
- An employee may not be another employee's dependent under the life-insurance plan because the city pays the cost for all employees to be covered for one times annual base salary. Eligible children may be covered only under one parent's plan.
- Couples who both work for the city should review their benefits file to ensure they are not covered as a dependent under each other's benefits plans. Benefits files are at 611 Walker, fourth floor. Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday – Friday. Appointments are not required.
- December is enrollment for the Dependent Care Reimbursement Plan. Employees reduce taxes on their income by contributing pretax dollars to their account. The maximum contribution is \$5,000 in 2010. Employees pay their dependent care expenses then file a claim and are reimbursed with pretax dollars. The new plan year begins Jan. 1.



Dr. St. John, Psy.D

In a review of 29 random clinical trials, German researchers concluded St. John's wort might be as effective as prescription antidepressants for major depression but cause fewer side effects. In one study, those taking the herbal medicine showed a 57 percent improvement in depression scores. Those taking paroxetine, an antidepressant, showed a 45 percent improvement and were more likely to experience side effects such as dry mouth, dizziness, nausea and diarrhea.

But there's still reason for caution. Only studies from German-speaking countries showed consistently positive results, perhaps suggesting a bias for the herb in those areas or the use of higher-quality herbal preparations. St. John's wort products sold in this country can vary drastically in quality and potency, and brands used in some studies have acted no better than a placebo.

Before trying St. John's wort, talk with your doctor or mental-health professional.

Diet sodas don't help your diet

When you sip a Diet Coke instead of regular soda, you're trimming about 100 calories per can. But those diet sodas might actually cause you to pile on pounds.

Artificial sweeteners found in low-calorie soda can be up to 600 times sweeter than sugar. Sweetness increases your craving for sweet foods and calories. Chugging soda all week can crowd out healthy drinks like water or tea. If you're drinking more than three diet sodas a day, you're not getting the benefits of other liquids.

New benefits blog

Want a new, fun way to keep up with Benefits Pulse and other city benefits information? Read the Benefits Guy blog at <https://benefitspulse.wordpress.com>. The blog, which will be updated every Friday, features health, wellness and dieting information to help you and your loved ones live healthier lives, interesting health and medical news, and important updates about your benefits information. And if you have a question, you can ask the Benefits Guy. He's the guy who knows benefits.

Cancer commonalities among Hispanics

Hispanics in the United States are less likely to die from cancer than whites. They are also less likely than whites to die from the four most common cancers: breast, prostate, colorectal and lung.

But they have higher rates of cancers linked to infections, including stomach cancer, associated with Helicobacter pylori infection; liver cancer, associated with hepatitis B and C infection; and cervix cancer, linked to human papillomavirus infection, according to the American Cancer Society's "Cancer Facts & Figures for Hispanics/Latinos 2009-2011."

Immunizations against human papillomavirus in teenage girls can prevent cervical cancer, and regular gynecological screenings for women can catch cervical cancer early, but Hispanic women are less likely to get either, the reports says.

Hispanics are also more likely than whites to be diagnosed with breast and melanoma cancer at a later stage, when they are more difficult to treat and have spread to other organs, the report stated.

So don't skip your screenings. Annual well-man and well-woman exams, mammograms and Pap smears are free in the HMO.

– Sources: HealthDay News, Men's Health Magazine, Consumer Reports on Health, AARP Bulletin

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muscles stiffen and it's harder to get moving again, Hendricks said. At home, he loves walking the dog and working in the garden.

"I can actually feel the blood pressure in my ears when I'm inside too long," said Hendricks, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2000.

He sometimes walks with a cane. It's harder for him to get around, but he makes it happen, Hendricks said. He used to spend about 70 percent of his time outside. These days, it's less.

Still, he moves. He walks his dog every morning before work, joking that the dog is actually walking him because he benefits from those moments as much as the dog. In addition, they help him get prepared for the workday.

But what about Houston's infamous heat?

"That's just a state of mind," Hendricks retorts. "The more you're outside when it's hot, the easier it is to get used to it."

For people who live in a more urban environment and may not have access to hiking trails and acres of forest, Berman

said a simple walk around the block is better than nothing.

Garcia recently faced a change in her routine with Roc Star. She moved from her home in far Northwest Houston back to Eastwood, a neighborhood east of downtown where she'd lived before.

She did it for the shorter commute. There's definitely less space and nature in Eastwood. But she has managed to find a good route that works for her and her pooch.

"We have the ability to walk, we have the ability to move around," Garcia said. "We need to take advantage of it." 

FLU continued from page 2

mental conditions.

After four days, Ivy Lopez's fever broke. She went back to school without symptoms 11 days after getting sick.

The CDC warns that people who get the flu need to remain isolated for at least 24 hours after the fever goes down without medicine.

The problem is the days before people know they have the illness.

Good hygiene

Novel H1N1 seems to have a longer incubation period, up to five days, Persse said.

"So you could be spreading it without knowing it," he said. "That's why it's important to be aware of your hygiene practices – sneeze into your sleeve if there are no tissues, wash your hands after coughing into them. Throw your used tissues in the trash."

Take heed of those, "Cover your cough" signs that sprung up in the spring in city buildings. Wash your hands and use hand sanitizer to wash away the germs. Also, don't rub your eyes with your hands.

If a family member gets novel H1N1, you can still go to work, the CDC said. Monitor your health and practice good hygiene habits so you don't spread it.

Yet, despite our precautions, the virus will spread.

"The epidemic could really take off and expand rapidly," Mouzoon warns.

A vaccine

The first batch of novel H1N1 vaccine arrived Oct. 5, and information about it is changing weekly. But as of this issue

going to print, the CDC said people 11 and older can prevent the misery and worry of getting novel H1N1 with a single vaccine treatment, either a shot or nose spray. Children 10 and under will need two shots.

The full effects of the inoculation won't kick in until 10 days after the shot. For seasonal flu, it takes 14 days for the full protection to take effect.

Only about 40 percent of the population gets a seasonal flu shot, said Dr. Kathy Troisi, assistant director, communicable disease control in Health & Human Services.

"People don't think the flu is a serious disease," she said. "But it is. Even if you don't die from it, you're laid low for weeks."

Some people don't get the vaccine because they think it was either ineffective previously or gave them the flu. "That's not possible," Persse said.

Flu vaccine shots for both seasonal and H1N1 don't contain a live virus, Troisi said. It has dead parts of the covering of the virus, and that can't make a person sick. The nasal spray doses contain a live virus that has adapted to living in the relative cold of your nose and won't survive in the warmth of the throat and lungs.

If a person gets sick after getting a shot, they were already carrying the virus, picked it up before the vaccination took full effect, or have some other illness that they label "flu," experts said.

Mouzoon said some people might have an allergic reaction to the shot that will give them a sore throat and runny eyes. And there's the pain of a sore arm.

Little Ivy Lopez won't have to worry about getting a vaccine for novel H1N1. She had to tough it out, as will others who get the virus before the vaccination arrives. But that means she's protected from the virus – at least until it undergoes a genetic drift.

But she will still be susceptible to seasonal flu.

"There's no cross protection from the vaccines or from the strains of flu," Persse said.

That could make for a long flu season. Stock up on good books and tissues. 

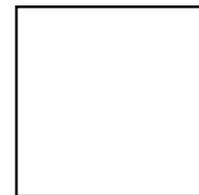
New Equipment / Technology

The Health & Human Services Department bought new equipment and technology over the summer in preparation for a novel H1N1 outbreak, Troisi said. The department has set up a Web site, www.houstonh1n1.org, with the latest novel H1N1 information.

This issue of Benefits Pulse went to print Oct. 12. Novel H1N1 information might have changed since then. For the latest information, visit www.benefitspulse.org.

Benefits *pulse*

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HMO Blue Texas in the Benefits Division

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HMO Blue Texas

866-757-6875
www.bcbstx.com

Prime Therapeutics

877-357-7463
www.myrxhealth.com

United Healthcare

866-605-2599

24/7 Nurseline

800-581-0353

Deferred Compensation (Great West)

713-426-5588

Municipal Pension (Pension and DROP)

713-759-9275

Fire Pension (Pension and DROP)

281-372-5100

Police Pension (Pension and DROP)

713-869-8734

Aetna

800-307-4830
www.aetnamedicare.com

Texas HealthSpring

800-846-2098
www.texashealthspring.com

TexanPlus

866-556-4614
www.sctexas.com

The city of Houston reserves the right to change, modify, increase or terminate any benefits.

EAP *window*



Rich Barrett, EAP manager

Q:

My father recently fell and broke his hip. Because both my brothers live in another state, I've moved in to take care of him. But that's hard work, and sometimes I get overwhelmed. What do you suggest?

A:

I know exactly what you're going through. Until recently, my 92-year-old father lived independently with minimal family support. Then, one night while trying to crush a roach, he fell and broke his hip. That changed everything. Now, he needed family support to do even the simplest things, such as use the bathroom, get dressed and prepare a meal.

I spent a week caring for him while my sister, who had moved in with him, was out of town on business. I had hoped we could do some of the things we used to do together, and I was eager to see the rehabilitation progress I had only heard about. But I was surprised by what I

found. I did things I hadn't done since my son was a baby. And we weren't doing those fun things together because my dad didn't want to leave the house.

We talked about why he didn't want to go out, but he wouldn't tell me. After much prodding, he told me he was afraid that he would not be able to get to the bathroom quick enough and would soil himself or my car. Some adult diapers took care of that problem, after I convinced him to wear them. They look and feel just like the shorts he already wore.

That week taught me a lot that can help you: I learned I could do things I wasn't sure I could do just because they

needed to be done. I'm sure you can stand up to the challenge when someone is there in need of help. I learned a bit of patience with a senior citizen goes a long way. After all, they're adjusting to tough changes. I learned suggestion and encouragement are important. They need and want to maintain control, but this is tough when their body no longer cooperates. I learned not to sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff. What's important is helping my dad, once so strong that he carried me in his arms, live happily, comfortably and as long as possible.

To schedule an appointment,
call 713-964-9906.
Para hacer una cita,
llame al 713-964-9906.