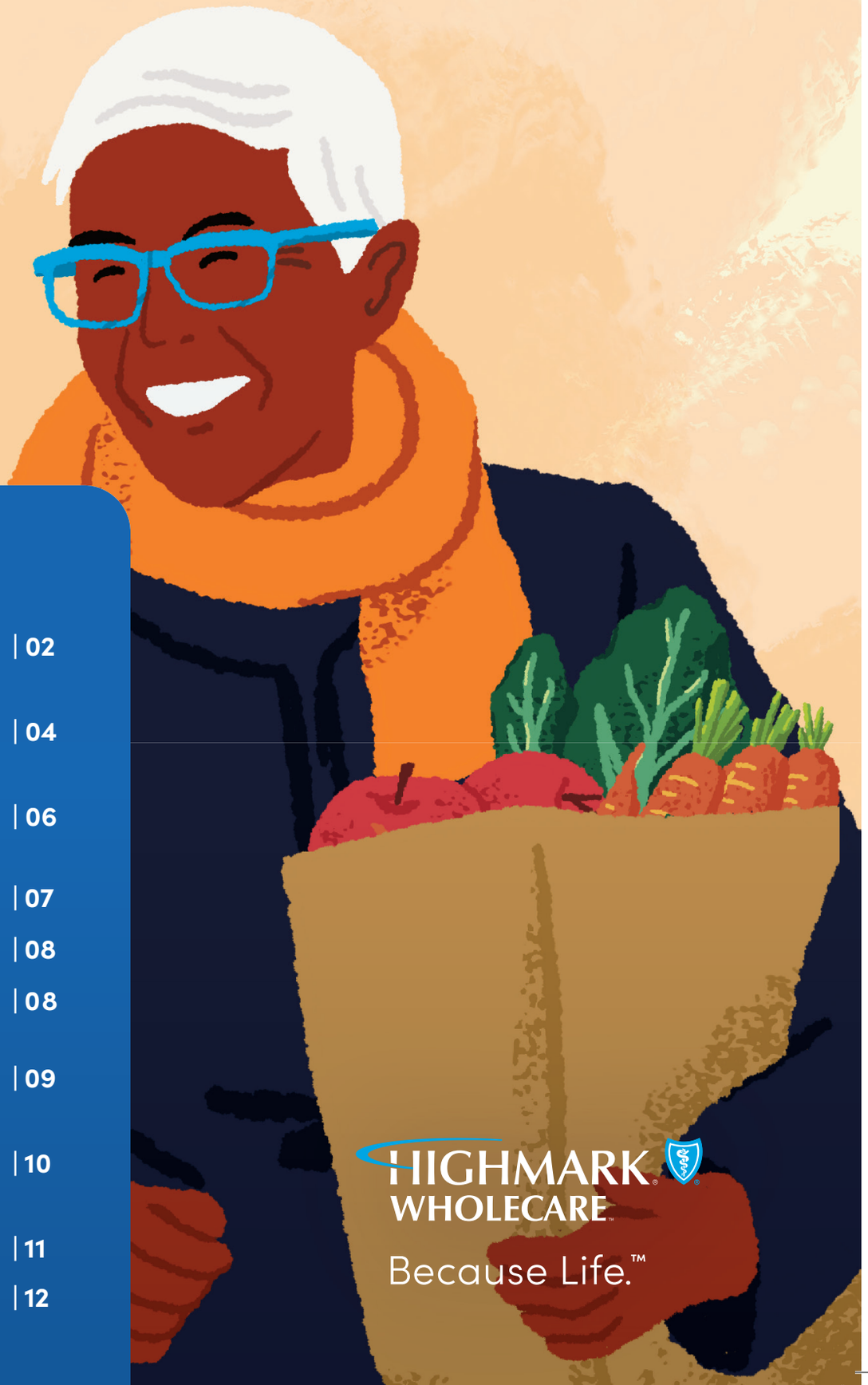
Health Matters

FALL 2025



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HIGHMARK WHOLECARE

Because Life.™

Protect your heart from high blood pressure

When temperatures drop, blood pressure can rise. Your medication helps keep you on track.

With colder air and more time indoors, it's essential to prioritize your health. **One simple habit can make a big difference: taking your blood pressure medication as prescribed.** This daily step helps protect your heart, supports healthy breathing, and keeps you feeling your best throughout the winter months.

How cold weather affects the heart

Cold weather can have a significant impact on your heart health. When the temperatures begin to fall, blood vessels naturally narrow to preserve heat. This increases the force needed to move blood through the body, which can raise blood pressure. According to the American Heart Association, winter months are linked to an uptick in blood pressure levels.[1]

Key facts about blood pressure:

- Blood pressure measures the force of blood pressing against vessel walls.
- High blood pressure, or hypertension, often has no noticeable symptoms.
- Left unmanaged, it can strain the heart and raise the risk of heart attack or stroke.

Taking prescribed blood pressure medications is one of the most effective ways to manage this risk — especially during winter.

Risk factors to keep in mind

Several factors can raise your risk for high blood pressure, including:

- A family history of high blood pressure.
- Being over the age of 50.
- Diabetes or chronic kidney disease.
- Race and gender risk factors.

Lifestyle changes for healthier blood pressure
While blood pressure medications are key, pairing them with positive changes to your daily routine can help you keep your numbers steady, and help you feel more balanced overall. They include:

- Eating a heart-healthy diet.
- Getting regular physical activity.
- Managing stress.
- Reducing or avoiding alcohol and tobacco.

Why healthy lungs matter for a healthy heart
Maintaining good respiratory health plays an important role in managing blood pressure. Low oxygen levels from poor lung function can strain the heart. Indoors, triggers like dry air and dust may affect breathing, while cold air outside can irritate airways — especially for those with asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Here's how to stay ahead of it:

- **Take all medications,** including inhalers, as prescribed.
- **Keep indoor air clean** and well ventilated.
- **Layer up outdoors** to help warm the air before it hits your lungs.
- **Check in with your care team** if your symptoms change.

Keep moving to support your heart and lungs
Movement is one of the best ways to lift your mood, support your heart, and strengthen your respiratory muscles during the colder months. Even when it's chilly outside, there are plenty of enjoyable ways to stay active indoors, including:

- Walking at malls, recreation centers, or around your home.
- Trying an online workout, gentle yoga, or a dance session.
- Enjoying light stretching, resistance bands, or bodyweight exercises at your own pace.

Remember, winter wellness begins with your medication routine
By taking your medications as prescribed, including blood pressure medications, you're supporting your heart, protecting your respiratory health, and giving your body the care it needs to thrive all season long.

[1] **Sourced from www.heart.org**

Simple steps for safer living[1]

A fall risk checklist for older adults and caregivers

Your independence matters. When you protect yourself from falls, you can stay active and keep doing the things you love, confidently, and on your own terms. The good news is, many falls can be prevented.

A quick conversation can help you feel more in control

Talking with your doctor, or a loved one's doctor, is one of the most important steps you can take to understand fall risk. Whether you're caring for yourself or a loved one, this conversation can help uncover potential concerns and identify practical solutions.

Here's a checklist of questions to ask your doctor at your next appointment:

Ask the doctor:

- ☐ **Do any medications cause dizziness or drowsiness?** Some medications can increase your risk of falling, so it's important to review them with your doctor.
- ☐ **How often should eye exams be scheduled?** Changes in vision can affect depth perception, balance, and your ability to safely navigate your surroundings.
- ☐ **Are there medical conditions that raise fall risk?** Certain medical conditions, like low blood pressure or arthritis, can affect your balance or movement.
- ☐ **What exercises or physical therapy programs can improve balance?** Building strength, balance, and flexibility can help reduce your chances of falling.
- ☐ **What equipment would help prevent a fall?** Supportive equipment may make daily activities safer and reduce your fall risk.
- ☐ **Is there a test that can evaluate fall risk?** Your doctor can perform simple tests to assess how likely you are to fall.

Caregivers can also bring this checklist when accompanying a loved one to a visit. It's a great way to advocate for their safety and support.

Simple steps for safe living continued from page 4

Check the home for hazards
Many fall risks are right at home — but thankfully, so are many of the solutions.

Keep an eye out for these common hazards:

- Loose rugs or mats that can slip
- Cords or clutter in walkways
- Dim lighting, especially near stairs
- Lack of handrails or grab bars
- Unstable furniture or uneven steps

Doing a home safety walk-through is a great way to prevent future falls and start an open conversation about safety.

Prevent falls, protect your independence
Falls can do more than cause injury — they can take you away from the things you love. Whether it's spending time with family or pursuing your hobbies, taking steps to prevent falls can help you stay active, independent, and in control of your life.

Consider these facts:

- **Stay connected** – 1 in 4 adults aged 65 and older falls each year, but many don't mention it to their doctor.
- **Maintain your strength and balance** – Just one fall doubles the risk of falling again.
- **Avoid a hospital visit** – Every year in the U.S.:
  - **3 million** emergency room visits are related to falls.
  - **1 million** older adults are hospitalized due to falls.
  - **Nearly 319,000** people are hospitalized for hip fractures.
- **Protect your brain** – Falls are the leading cause of traumatic brain injuries (TBIs).

Check out important notices online.

Highmark Wholecare cares about the health and well-being of our members. We have guidelines in place to make sure you receive the quality care and service you deserve.

Go to **HMKCares.com/Newsletters** to view these and other important topics:

- Members' rights and responsibilities
- Medical necessity
- Doctor appointment guidelines
- Second opinions
- Protecting your privacy

You can also ask for a printed copy of the Important Member Notices by calling **1-800-685-5209** (TTY: 711).

Make the most of your benefits this year

Preventive care is covered, and it's an important part of staying healthy

Your Highmark Wholecare plan includes a variety of preventive tests and screenings designed to help you catch potential health issues early, often before you notice symptoms. Early detection can lead to more effective treatment and better health outcomes.

Now's the perfect time to schedule your:

Annual Wellness Visit – A chance to talk to your primary care provider (PCP) about your overall health, review your medications, and receive guidance tailored to you.

Breast cancer screening – An important screening for women over 50 or those at higher risk.

Colorectal cancer screening – A key part of staying on top of your health, recommended for adults 45 and older. A colonoscopy is the preferred method, but convenient at-home screening options are also available. Talk to your provider to determine the best choice for you.

Diabetes screening – If you have diabetes, regular monitoring is essential. This includes a diabetic retinal eye exam to check for eye damage, a blood sugar check to manage your glucose levels, and kidney monitoring to detect any potential problems early.

Why the flu shot is a smart health move

Discover the proven benefits of this yearly vaccine

There's a lot of helpful information about the flu shot, and understanding it can empower you to make the best choice for your health. Getting a flu shot is a simple way to stay well and keep enjoying the people and activities you love. Let's look at a few facts that can help you move forward with confidence.

The truth about flu shots
Understanding the flu shot starts with the facts. Here are a few to keep in mind.

- **Myth:** You can get the flu from the flu shot.
  Fact: The flu shot won't make you sick. The injectable vaccine uses an inactivated (dead) version of the virus, which means it can't cause the flu — but it can help your body build strong protection against it.
- **Myth:** If I'm healthy, I don't need it.
  Fact: As we age, our immune systems naturally weaken. This makes us more susceptible to the flu and its complications, even if we feel healthy. Vaccination helps boost your immune response and plays a key role in keeping you protected.
- **Myth:** The flu is just a bad cold.
  Fact: The flu tends to be far more intense than a cold and can lead to serious illnesses requiring hospitalization, such as pneumonia, sepsis (a life-threatening response to infection), and worsening of chronic conditions like asthma and heart failure.
- **Myth:** It's too late to get the flu shot once flu season starts.
  Fact: The flu can circulate well into spring. Even if you get the flu later in the season, it can still cause serious complications. Vaccination can help you avoid getting sick or reduce the severity of your symptoms.

Protect your health, enjoy what you love
Whether it's family dinner, community events, or catching up with friends, staying well helps you keep those meaningful moments on your calendar. A flu shot offers added protection to help you stay well all season long, especially if you're 65 or older.
Why it matters:

- The flu can lead to complications that impact your day-to-day life.
- Recovery can take weeks, and often means missing out on special events.
- Prevention helps you stay social, independent, and feeling your best.

Remember, flu shots are covered under Highmark Wholecare plans. Schedule yours with your doctor or stop by a local retail pharmacy. It's a smart step toward staying healthy.

All information in this article is sourced from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Seasonal Flu Vaccine Basics.

cdc.gov/flu/vaccines

Brain Game — Heart Smarts

Take a quick break with this heart health word scramble. Each word ties into our feature article, **Protect your heart from high blood pressure**.

RHEAT _____

OLBOD RSPSEURE _____

CMEAIDITONS _____

MVEMETON _____

DOOLB SSEVLES _____

Mark your calendar

November

COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) Awareness Month Talk to your doctor about your inhalers, vaccines, and ways to manage symptoms. A few simple check-ins can help you breathe easier.

World Diabetes Day (November 14) Make sure to complete your A1C test, retinal eye exam, and kidney screening. It's also a good idea to talk with your doctor about your medications.

December

Crohn's and Colitis Awareness Week (December 1 – 7) Check in with your doctor about symptoms like fatigue, cramping, or changes in digestion to stay ahead of flares — and feel better day to day.

And don't forget, the deadline to enroll in and complete all rewardable activities from your **Personalized Wellness Plan** is **December 31, 2025**. Once you do, you'll earn a Highmark Goodness Reward.

Answer Key 1. Heart 2. Blood pressure 3. Medications 4. Movement 5. Blood vessels

Finding your way through grief

What to expect and how to cope.

Grief is a natural and deeply personal response to loss. Whether it's the passing of a loved one, a change in living situation, or a shift in independence, grief can take many forms. While it's commonly associated with sadness, it can also bring feelings of anger, guilt, confusion, or even relief.

Everyone experiences grief differently, but understanding its stages can help make sense of the emotions that arise. They include:

1. **Denial** – This is the initial shock of loss, where it may feel impossible to accept what has happened. It can manifest as numbness, disbelief, or avoidance.
2. **Anger** – As reality sets in, feelings of frustration and helplessness can turn into anger. This anger may be directed at oneself, others, or even the situation itself.
3. **Bargaining** – In this stage, people may dwell on "what if" or "if only" statements, hoping to change or undo the loss. It's a way of trying to regain control in an uncontrollable situation.
4. **Depression** – Profound sadness, withdrawal, and feelings of emptiness can set in as the full weight of the loss is felt. This stage can impact daily life and motivation.
5. **Acceptance** – Over time, individuals begin to find peace with their loss. Acceptance doesn't mean forgetting; rather, it means learning to live with the loss while continuing forward.

How grief can affect your health and daily life.

Grief doesn't just affect emotions, it impacts overall health. Persistent grief can lead to:

- **Anxiety and depression** – Sadness, worry, or emotional numbness that lasts longer than two weeks.
- **Physical health concerns** – A weak immune system, increased blood pressure, and disrupted sleep.
- **Trouble taking medication as prescribed** – You may forget to take medications or lose motivation to follow treatment plans.

When grief starts to interfere with daily life, it may be time to ask for help.

Building your emotional well-being.

Healing takes time, but small steps can make a big difference. Consider these ways to prioritize your well-being:

- **Identify your needs** – Acknowledge your emotions and be honest about what type of support you need.
- **Seek professional help** – Therapy and counseling can be invaluable tools for processing grief.
- **Build a support system** – Stay connected with friends, family, or support groups to combat loneliness.
- **Prioritize self-care** – Engage in activities that bring comfort, whether it's reading, walking, or meditation.
- **Be patient and kind to yourself** – Healing isn't linear, and it's okay to have good days and bad days.

You deserve support and healing.

Coping with grief takes time, but healing starts with allowing yourself to seek support and care. You are not alone, and you deserve to find comfort, strength, and hope along the way.

Manage diabetes during the holidays

Tips to navigate the season with confidence

The holidays are a time for joy, connection, and delicious food. If you're managing diabetes, you might be wondering how to navigate the festivities while staying healthy. With a little planning, it's possible to enjoy every moment — festivities, food, and all — while keeping your blood sugar in check.

How to handle holiday stress

The holidays can be joyful — and a little hectic. Managing stress helps you feel your best and keeps your blood sugar steady. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- **Take short breaks** – Even a 5-minute walk or a few deep breaths can help reset your mood.
- **Stick to a routine when you can** – Regular meals, sleep, and activity go a long way in keeping stress (and blood sugar) in check.
- **Make time for things you enjoy** – Whether it's listening to music or calling a friend, make some time for you.
- **Say no when you need to** – It's OK to set boundaries to protect your energy and health.

Holiday nutrition tips

It's possible to enjoy your favorite holiday foods with just a few mindful swaps and choices:

- **Plan ahead** – Have a light, healthy snack — like a handful of nuts or some fresh berries — before a big gathering to avoid sudden drops in blood sugar or overeating.
- **Watch your portions** – Use smaller plates and limit desserts.
- **Fill up on fiber** – Make vegetables the star of your plate, especially low-carb options like leafy greens, broccoli, or roasted Brussels sprouts.
- **Take a dish** – If asked to bring something, bring a low-carbohydrate dish that supports healthy eating.
- **Avoid sugary drinks** – Water, sparkling water, or unsweetened beverages are great alternatives to soda, juice, and holiday cocktails.

Your health is the best gift

You don't have to choose between enjoying the season and taking care of your health. You can do both, with a little mindfulness. Talk to your doctor, or see if nutritional support may be right for you.

How to use antibiotics effectively

Highmark Wholecare is committed to providing the highest quality of care and experience for our members. Here are some facts about antibiotic overuse to help you talk with your doctor to make the best decisions for you and your family.

When antibiotics are not needed

- Antibiotics do not work against viruses (such as COVID-19, the flu, or the common cold).
- Antibiotics are not needed for many sinus and ear infections, which often get better on their own.
- Unnecessary antibiotic use can lead to antibiotic resistance, making it difficult to treat infection and causing more side effects.

Common side effects of antibiotic use

- Rash
- Dizziness
- Nausea and abdominal pain
- Diarrhea
- Yeast infection

Serious side effects

- Clostridioides difficile (C. diff), which causes severe diarrhea that can lead to organ damage and even death.
- Severe and life-threatening allergic reactions, such as wheezing, hives, shortness of breath, and anaphylaxis (which also includes feeling like your throat is closing or choking, or your voice is changing).

What can you do to feel better?

- Do **NOT** call and ask your provider for an antibiotic prescription. If you are sick, your doctor will examine you and determine if you have an infection that should be treated with antibiotics.
- **DO** call and ask your provider about ways to relieve symptoms caused by a virus.
- **If your doctor prescribes antibiotics**, take them exactly as prescribed.
- **Talk with a health care professional** immediately if you develop any side effects.

Do your best to stay healthy and keep others healthy

- Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough and sneeze.
- Stay home when sick.
- Be fully vaccinated, including against flu and COVID-19.

Important phone numbers

Member Services
1-800-685-5209 (TTY: 711)
Seven days a week,
Oct. 1 – March 31, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m.,
Monday – Friday
April 1 – Sept. 30, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m.

24-Hour Nurse Line
1-855-805-9420 (TTY: 711)
24 hours a day, 365 days a year

Transportation Benefit
1-877-797-0339 (TTY: 711)
Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Saturday, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Goodness Rewards
1-833-559-2858 (TTY: 711)
Monday – Friday, 7 a.m. – 7 p.m.

My Healthy Flex Benefit
1-833-623-2619 (TTY: 711)
Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m.
MyHealthyFlex.com

Fitness Benefit
888-423-4632 (TTY: 711)
Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m.

PA Quit Now
(for help quitting smoking)
1-800-QUIT-NOW
(1-800-784-8669) (TTY: 711)

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call or text 988 or
1-800-273-8255 (TTY: 711)

National Helpline
(if struggling with substance use)
1-800-662-HELP (4357)

211 United Way
Dial 211 for help getting connected

Report Suspected Abuse of an Older Adult
1-800-490-8505
24 hours a day

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Highmark Wholecare complies with applicable Federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, creed, religious affiliation, ancestry, sex, gender, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation.

ATTENTION: If you speak English, free language translation and interpretation services are available to you. Appropriate auxiliary aids and services (such as large print, audio, and Braille) to provide information in accessible formats are also available free of charge. Call the number on the back of your ID card (TTY: 711) for help.

ATENCIÓN: Si habla español, tiene a su disposición servicios gratuitos de traducción e interpretación de idiomas. También hay disponibles ayudas y servicios auxiliares adecuados (como letra grande, audio y Braille) para proporcionar información en formatos accesibles sin cargo. Llame al número que figura al dorso de su tarjeta de identificación (TTY: 711) si necesita ayuda.

注意：如果您说中文，我们将为您提供免费的语言翻译和口译服务。此外，我们还免费提供相应的辅助工具和服务（如大字体、音频和盲文），以便您获取无障碍格式的信息。如需帮助，请拨打您的 ID 卡背面的号码（听障人士专用号码： 711）。

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