

# COMPA N I O N HealthWord

A Publication for Companion HealthCare Members

## We Work Hard to Help You Be Healthy

You want your health plan to work for you. Companion HealthCare is among the hardest-working, most highly rated plans nationwide when it comes to wellness, disease management programs and member satisfaction.

All our health plans have earned “Excellent Accreditation” status — the highest level awarded — from the National Committee for Quality Assurance. But that’s not all. Companion HealthCare consistently is rated above the national average in effectiveness of care measures by NCQA, too.

What does this mean to you? It tells you we work hard to encourage you to seek preventive care and manage any illnesses you may have — so you can lead a healthier, more productive life!

## The Numbers are In — and They Speak for Themselves!

NCQA is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to measuring the quality of America’s healthcare. Its Health Plan Employer Data and Information Set, or HEDIS<sup>®\*</sup>, is the nation’s premier measurement tool for managed care quality and service.

The most recent HEDIS<sup>®</sup> results from NCQA indicate that we’re well above average — and continue to improve each year — in critical measures of healthcare. Our programs encourage screenings, disease management and wellness — and the numbers show our programs are working!



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Fall 2001

Up to 85% of our members regularly receive breast cancer and cervical cancer screenings. Our members have better control of their high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol than the NCQA average. And we far exceed the average for obtaining eye exams among our members with diabetes. Look how we stack up!

Care Measure	Our Results	NCQA Average
Breast cancer screening	85%	74%
Cervical cancer screening	84%	78%
Prenatal care in first trimester	93%	83%
Check-ups after delivery	87%	74%
Beta blocker treatment after heart attack	96%	89%
Eye exams for people with diabetes	74%	48%
Childhood immunizations	87%	67%
Adolescent immunizations (MMR & HepB)	72%	37%
Controlling high blood pressure	61%	51%
Cholesterol management — screening	80%	74%
Cholesterol management — control	64%	53%

We take these effectiveness of care measures seriously. They give us the benchmark on which to build, so we can continue to offer you a comprehensive health plan. We want you to stay healthy!

\*HEDIS® is a registered trademark of the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA).

## Flu Vaccine

It's that time again. Along with the beautiful autumn leaves comes the flu season. So be prepared! Get your flu shot. With few exceptions, most people can benefit from getting vaccinated. However, the flu shot is specifically recommended for anyone over 50 years old and anyone at high risk. According to the Centers for Disease Control, those at high risk include adults and children with respiratory diseases like asthma, and anyone with chronic diseases of the heart, lungs or kidneys.

A common myth is that you can catch the flu from getting a flu shot. This is not true! The shots are made from killed virus, which makes them safe and effective.

Companion HealthCare covers flu shots at 100%, once you've paid your normal office visit copayment during a visit to your primary care physician. Don't wait to make your appointment. The best time to receive the flu shot is in October and November, to give your body ample time to build up strength to fight those flu bugs!

# What We Don't Know Can Hurt Us

## About some common health problems that are commonly misunderstood

Colds are so common they're virtually impossible to avoid—in fact, many adults suffer 3 or 4 a year, and until about the age of 5, children will catch an average of 8 colds a year.

The flu season strikes between November and April. Although not as prevalent as the common cold, during outbreaks the flu can have an attack rate ranging from 10% to 40%.

Sinusitis, an inflammation of the sinus cavities, is often triggered by a cold or an allergy attack and is typically associated with bacterial infection. While sinus infection does not affect as many people as the common cold, about 35 million people develop this condition each year, making it another of the most common health problems in the United States.

Because the incidence of colds, flu, and sinus infection is so high, it accounts for a very large number of the visits we make to the doctor. Cold and flu symptoms can make us (or our children) feel so miserable, we think we need prescription antibiotics—but as we'll discuss, this is *not* the case. And, an unnecessary course of antibiotic treatment for a cold or flu can do more harm than good. On the other hand, antibiotics are both necessary and effective for the treatment of a sinus infection.

In order to know when we *should* visit the doctor and when we might need an antibiotic, it is important to learn how to tell the difference between colds, flu, and sinus infection, and how to manage the symptoms of each.

## Why colds and flu don't get better with antibiotic treatment

Colds are almost always caused by viruses. Presently, there is no medication effective against the types of viruses that cause colds. Influenza is also a viral illness; however, there are vaccines available that help guard against it.

While antibiotics are effective against many kinds of bacteria, they do nothing to fight viruses. Sometimes, a patient will request an antibiotic from his or her doctor hoping it will speed the recovery from a cold or flu, or prevent a more serious secondary infection caused by bacteria. Most

medical studies, however, have shown that this does not work. In general, the best way to prevent a cold or flu from turning into a more serious illness is simply treat the symptoms while they run their natural course.

## How overuse of antibiotics has caused a serious problem

Millions of children and adults have taken antibiotics unnecessarily, causing many strains of bacteria to become resistant or immune to the drugs that were once effective against them. Resistant bacteria, or "superbugs," make it more difficult to treat the infection they have caused—and worse, these "superbugs" can be spread rapidly to others, making the problem bigger and more dangerous.

For example, about 25% of *pneumococcus* bacteria, which can cause many illnesses including middle-ear infections, pneumonia, sinusitis, blood infections, and spinal meningitis, no longer respond to penicillin—previously the most effective antibiotic against them.

Most infections caused by resistant bacteria can be treated with broad-spectrum antibiotics that target a larger number of strains. But a few "superbugs" have become resistant to all existing antibiotics. Experts worry that if resistant strains that are now exceptions become the rule, relatively simple illnesses, such as ear infections, could turn into more serious conditions.

Antibiotic use may also cause yeast infections or result in other side effects, so it is important to know when antibiotics are necessary to treat an illness and when an illness may be effectively treated with other medications.

## The solution: deciding, with your doctor, when antibiotics should be used

One of the most effective steps we can take to stem the rise of bacterial resistance is to better understand the symptoms and treatments of colds and flu. Sometimes, however, we are not certain if we are dealing with a cold, flu, or something more serious. In these cases, it helps to review the classic signs and symptoms of colds and flu:

### Colds

- Symptoms usually begin rapidly
- Symptoms typically include:
  - sore throat
  - cough
  - runny/stuffy nose
  - fever\*
  - postnasal drip
  - laryngitis

\*Usually lower than 101°F in adults lasting no more than 48 hours; in children, fevers can reach as high as 105°F.



Other symptoms include sinus congestion, colored nasal discharge, and headache. However, these symptoms do not necessarily mean there is an infection or the need for an antibiotic.

Colds typically last between 5 and 14 days, with symptoms gradually improving after 3 to 5 days. If certain new symptoms develop or if there is little improvement after 2 weeks, sinus infection may be the problem.

Flu symptoms are similar but more severe than those of colds. Additional symptoms include chills, aches and pains (most pronounced in the back and legs), and sensitivity to light. The onset of the flu is sudden with chills and fever up to 103°F. Symptoms usually subside rapidly after 2 to 3 days when the fever breaks, though fever may last up to 5 days without complications.

## Symptoms of Sinus Infection

- headache
- fever
- tooth pain
- nasal congestion and thick, colored mucus
- pain in cheeks and forehead (especially when bending over)
- decreased or absent sense of smell
- pain when chewing
- persistent bad breath

## Taking care of the all-too-common cold and flu

The bedrock of treatment for colds and flu is rest and lots of fluids—especially warm fluids (chicken soup is not a bad idea).

Remember, a cold simply has to run its course. An antibiotic is not going to make it better, and over long-term use, it may do considerable harm.

The flu requires plenty of rest. Contact your doctor to discuss options for medication to help relieve your symptoms.

Certain over-the-counter medications and home remedies also can be recommended for relief of symptoms:

- For general discomfort and fever, use acetaminophen or ibuprofen
- For nasal congestion and sinus pressure, use an oral decongestant, such as SUDAFED® (brand of pseudoephedrine hydrochloride), to reduce mucus buildup and keep your head clear
- For sore throat, use a phenol-type throat spray or lozenges, hard candy, or salt-water gargle
- For coughs not relieved by nondrug measures, such as a steamy shower, use dextromethorphan HBr (with guaifenesin if an expectorant is desired) or a phenol-type throat spray

## How to recognize a sinus infection

Sinusitis, an inflammation of the sinus cavities, is often related to bacterial infection. When you have a cold or an allergy attack, your sinuses are unable to drain and can become inflamed, which can lead to congestion and infection.

Unlike a cold or the flu, a sinus infection needs to be diagnosed by a doctor and may need to be treated with an antibiotic. But because some of the symptoms of sinus infection are similar to those of a cold, you should be aware of how they differ. If an apparent cold persists for more than 10 to 14 days, or if you experience any of the following symptoms, call your doctor:

Children with sinus infections may have other symptoms including sore throat and persistent cough that worsens at night.

## What you can do to manage symptoms of a sinus infection

In addition to the antibiotic your doctor may prescribe for a sinus infection, you may need a decongestant, a mucus-thinning agent, and/or a steroid nasal spray. These can help reduce tissue swelling, promote mucus drainage, and help maintain a normal sinus opening.

Never use nasal decongestants for more than the time indicated. Prolonged use can actually cause a rebound condition that makes nasal congestion worse. Your doctor may prefer that you take an oral decongestant, such as SUDAFED, which is widely available without a prescription.

Your doctor may also recommend you use a room vaporizer or humidifier at night to improve nasal drainage, or saline nasal drops to flush your nose and sinuses.

Whether you have a cold, flu, or sinus infection, contact your doctor if your symptoms do not improve within 3 to 4 days, or if you feel your symptoms are more severe than the colds or flu you have had in the past. If you have asthma, chronic bronchitis, or emphysema, ask your doctor if you should make an appointment for an office visit.

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# HANDLING YOUR HEARTBURN

Whether it begins after eating, after a tough day, or as a pain that wakes you in the middle of the night, it's there. Lingering and burning, it makes you feel uncomfortable. You are not alone — heartburn affects millions of Americans each day.

## What exactly is heartburn?

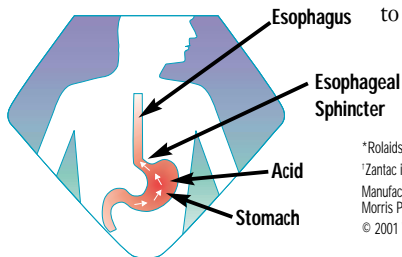
When you swallow food, a muscle called the esophageal sphincter works like a valve between the esophagus and the stomach to let food into the stomach, while keeping stomach acid out of the esophagus. But sometimes the sphincter fails to do its job properly and acid rises into the esophagus. This causes the burning feeling in your chest known as heartburn. But what you may not know is that heartburn can be controlled.

## Your diet and lifestyle choices are key.

With a few simple changes, you can keep your heartburn in check. You can start by taking a closer look at your diet and lifestyle. Heartburn is often triggered by certain foods.

Here are some to avoid:

- Fatty or fried food
- Spicy food
- Citrus fruits and juices
- Chocolate
- Peppermint
- Coffee, tea, or colas
- Alcoholic beverages



By watching how many of these heartburn-triggering foods and beverages you eat or drink, you can actually lower your chances of getting heartburn. Heartburn has also been associated with certain lifestyle choices. If you smoke, wear your clothing too tight, or experience a lot of stress, you may be a candidate for heartburn. Eating too quickly and being overweight are also heartburn triggers. Some ways to address this are to eat more slowly and consume smaller portions. Also, always try to allow extra time after a meal (at least one hour) before going to bed.

## Have regular medical examinations.

It is also very important that you have regular medical examinations. Your heartburn may be caused by medication that you are taking, including aspirin, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), and high blood pressure or heart medications. If you are taking medications and you suffer from heartburn — *do not stop taking your medications* — ask your healthcare provider if any of them may be contributing to your heartburn.

## You have the power to reduce your risk of heartburn.

There are many products available that can help you keep a handle on your heartburn. You may have taken an antacid in the past, such as Roloids<sup>®</sup>,\* to help relieve your heartburn. There are now other over-the-counter products known as acid reducers that you can use, such as Zantac<sup>®</sup> 75, which can help you control stomach acid for many hours. Ask your doctor if one of these may be right for you. By watching your diet, making the right lifestyle choices, and selecting the proper heartburn medication, you can help ensure that heartburn is one thing you won't have to worry about.



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# What's for



You probably agree that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but who has time to eat breakfast? With today's busy lifestyles, many of us are tempted to either skip the meal or at best, skimp on it. But next time you're ready to run out the door without that important meal, consider these benefits of eating breakfast:

- Breakfast helps increase your powers of concentration. Your brain needs to refuel in the morning to reach its peak performance.
- When you're not hungry, your attitude is more positive and your mood is improved. Hunger can make you irritable.
- You can work or study more efficiently when you're not thinking about your stomach.
- When you eat breakfast, you experience increased energy or athletic performance. You're not running on empty!
- Those who eat breakfast tend to be leaner than those who do not. Breakfast skippers burn fewer calories throughout the day, which can result in weight gain.
- Your diet will improve overall. Breakfast eaters' diets tend to include more fiber, vitamins and minerals, and less fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. Smaller, more frequent meals help control weight and keep cholesterol in check.

Still making excuses? Then check out these sensible responses to common excuses!

- "I don't have time." Just wake up 15 minutes earlier and you'll have time for breakfast at home.
- "I'm not hungry in the morning." You may have eaten too much the night before, and that can contribute to weight gain. Try "portable" foods like yogurt or bagels, and eat within two hours of waking. You can drink a refreshing smoothie for a liquid breakfast, or eat something small and take a mid-morning snack with you.
- "I'm on a diet." You won't get fat by eating a healthy breakfast, but skipping breakfast can lead to excessive hunger and overeating later in the day.

# Breakfast?

And another breakfast bonus — it may be the easiest way to reach your daily fiber quota. The *Journal of Nutrition Education* suggests a breakfast that includes a whole-wheat bagel with reduced-fat cream cheese, or high-fiber cereal with nonfat milk.

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. We want you to know that early detection is your best protection against this disease. The survival rate for breast cancer is greater than 97% when detected early. To increase your chances for early detection, get regular mammograms, perform breast self-exams and have a yearly clinical breast exam by your physician. If you are 40 or older, please have a mammogram every one or two years. Women ages 50 and older

should have a mammogram every year. Just ask your physician for a referral.

And don't forget to wear a pink ribbon in October to honor those who have fought — and are still fighting — breast cancer.

## Breast Cancer Awareness

# Help Your Teen Say No to Smoking

Every day in our country, 6,000 young people start smoking, an alarming 50% increase since 1998. Even more alarming is this statistic: a third of those new young smokers will die early from tobacco-related diseases. How can you help your teenager avoid peer pressure and say no to smoking?

First, it's a good idea to have some facts to back you up. And while facts are essential, it's also good to know the law is on your side. It is against the law in the United States to sell tobacco products to anyone younger than 18. Retailers are required by law to ask to see identification before they can sell tobacco products to anyone who appears to be younger than 27.

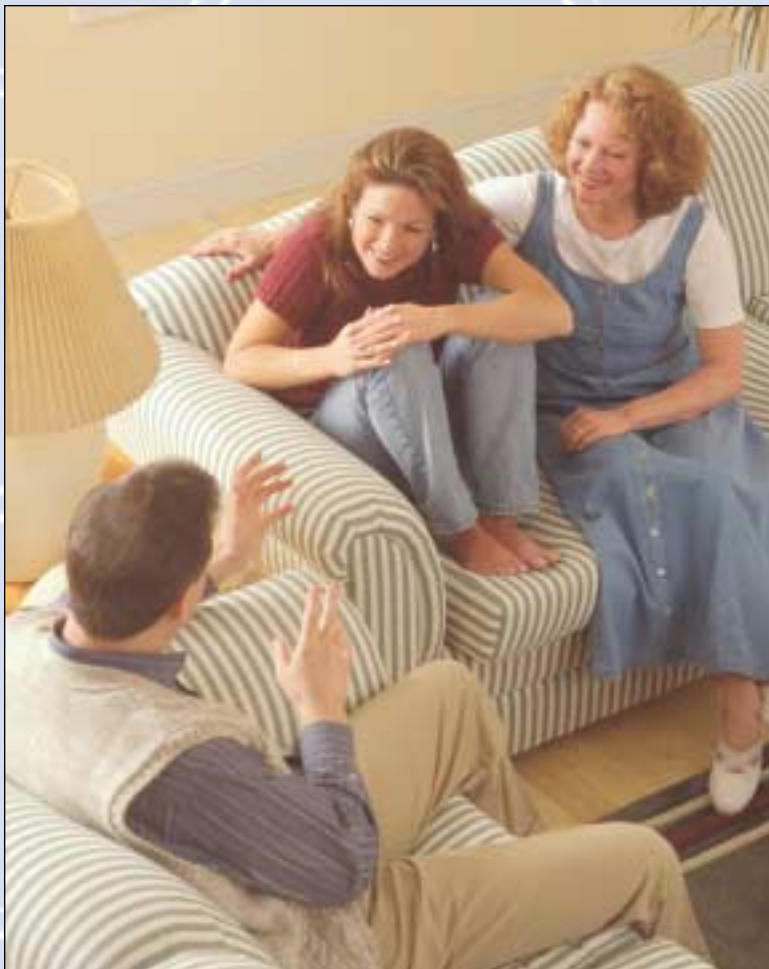
The facts show that tobacco is dangerous. It is a highly addictive drug containing thousands of harmful chemicals, including nicotine, the substance that causes smokers to become addicted to tobacco. Tar and carbon monoxide are especially damaging to the body, and they're both found in tobacco products.

Tobacco is particularly hazardous to teenagers because their bodies still are developing. The chemicals in cigarettes can negatively affect their growth and development. Cigars and smokeless tobacco, also known as chewing tobacco or snuff, are just as dangerous as cigarettes.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently updated its policy statement about teenage smoking to address the growing national concern. In a recent issue of its scientific journal *Pediatrics*, the AAP offers tips to help prevent your children from using tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. Even if your children are not yet teenagers, the tips are helpful now.

- Talk with your child honestly. Ideally you should begin discussion and guidance about avoiding tobacco use by the time a child is 5.
- Really listen to your child. Encourage him to share questions and concerns about tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.

- Help your child develop self-confidence. Look for all the good things in your child, and then tell her how proud you are.
- Help your child develop strong values. Teach him how to make decisions based on standards of right and wrong.
- Be a good example. Your own habits and thoughts about tobacco, alcohol and other drugs make an impression on your child.
- Help her deal with peer pressure and acceptance. Remind her that a real friend won't care if she does not smoke.
- Make family rules that help your child say "no." Talk with him about your expectation that he will say "no" to tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, and spell out what will happen if these rules are broken.



- Encourage healthy, creative activities. Look for ways to get your child involved in athletics, hobbies, school clubs and other activities that reduce boredom.
- Team up with other parents. Work with them to build a drug- and tobacco-free environment for children. A good way to stop a child from smoking is to stop his or her friends from smoking, too.

There are many resources available to help you help your teenager. Here are a few organizations you can contact:

Food and Drug Administration  
1-888-FDA-4KIDS  
[www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)  
(to report the sale of tobacco to a minor or to request information)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information  
1-800-729-6686  
1-800-487-4899 (TTY)  
[www.health.org](http://www.health.org)

American Lung Association  
1-800-LUNG-USA  
[www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)

With continued effort and reinforcement, you can create the kind of home environment for your teenagers that will keep them from ever lighting up!

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## COMPANION HealthWord

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### Pets Are Good For You

Do you have a pet? Many people share their lives with pets. They receive love and devotion from pets — and much more!

Research shows pets offer health benefits to their owners. A classic study showed that pet ownership boosted survival rates in heart disease patients. Later research found that simply petting a dog or cat reduced the pet owner's blood pressure. And in a recent study, women who were put in stressful situations coped better when accompanied by their dogs than by their best female friends.

Dog owners have an extra advantage — their pets offer them plenty of opportunity for exercise.

