



Healthy and Connected Member Newsletter - January 2026

Healthy and Connected is the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' (SCDHHS) member e-newsletter. Healthy and Connected features tips and tools to help you and your loved ones connect to resources and live healthier lives.

Starting Healthy Living at an Early Age



Teaching our kids how to live a healthy lifestyle is important to instill at an early age. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, children ages three to five should be active throughout the day. Types of activities can range from informal active play to more organized sports. Starting to introduce and encourage movement

and play can help them build a foundation for an active life.

Jan. 30 is Preschool Health and Fitness Day. Try some [new ways](#) to make exercise fun for your kids. There are a few methods you can try.

1. Make exercise part of your family's daily routine. This can look like taking a walk together or playing an active game.
2. Take your kids somewhere they can play, like a park or basketball court.
3. Encourage them when they show interest in new activities.
4. Try doing something active together after dinner instead of watching TV. You could play chase or tag, ride bikes or walk through the neighborhood.

While teaching them how to exercise, you can also teach your children the value of [healthy eating](#). Kids need fruits and vegetables each day to help them grow and their brain develop. You can use fresh, canned or frozen. Try introducing fruit and veggies into their meals and snacks. If using canned products, try to use ones with low sodium and little to no added sugars.

Fueling Ourselves with Nutritious Food

We may have just finished a holiday season filled with sweet treats and hearty meals, but eating those types of unhealthier foods should mainly be for special occasions. March is National Nutrition Month. It's important to fuel our bodies with nutritious, healthy options. What makes food nutritious? When something is nutrient-dense, it's rich in vitamins and minerals [important to our health](#). [Healthy eating](#) includes things like:

- A variety of fruits and vegetables
- Full-fat dairy products with no added sugar
- Sources of protein like fish and lean cuts of unprocessed meat
- Nuts and legumes like lentils, chickpeas and beans
- Limiting red and processed meats
- Reducing intake of sodium, added sugars and alcohol

By making small changes to your body, you will begin to see [health benefits](#). This can include:

- A stronger immune system. Eating foods high in fiber and protein can help you fight off germs that cause cold and flu. You may also recover quicker when you get sick.
- More energy throughout the day. Eating foods with protein, whole grains and unsaturated fats will cause your blood sugar to rise slowly. Your body will then turn these foods into energy.
- A sharper mind. A healthy diet gives your brain fuel to get you through your day.
- Better sleep. Foods that are high in vitamin B, like fish, legumes and eggs help balance melatonin. Melatonin is the hormone that helps you sleep.
- Less joint pain. Anti-inflammatory foods like salmon, nuts and beans can ease joint pain and help other symptoms of arthritis.

Healthy Connections Medicaid members with certain health conditions can get nutrition counseling. These include obesity, eating disorders or conditions that affect

how you grow or eat. Members can receive up to 12 hours of nutrition counseling each year. It can be done in person or through telehealth. Members can receive counseling from their doctor's office or a registered dietitian. The services must be prescribed or referred by a doctor.

The Importance of a Good Night's Sleep

Sometimes it can feel like the only time to get things done on our to-do list is at the end of the day. This often can include staying up later at night. We tend to give up our sleep to “make it happen.” But getting enough rest is more than something we should just try to do. Prioritizing a healthy amount of sleep is key to our [health and emotional well-](#)



being. There are two main parts to having a healthy sleep.

1. **Getting the right amount of sleep.** This can help you get sick less often and stay at a healthy weight. It can reduce stress and improve your mood. Your heart and metabolism can benefit from your body getting enough sleep too. Adults 18-60 years old are advised to get seven hours of sleep or more per night. School-age kids ages six to 12 should get between nine to 12 hours per night.
2. **Getting good sleep.** There are habits we can adopt to help our quality of sleep. Try going to bed and waking up at the same time each day. Keep your bedroom quiet, calming and at a cooler temperature. Avoiding large meals and alcohol before bedtime can also help with better sleep. Last, turn off electronics at least 30 minutes before you go to bed.

March 8-14 is National Sleep Awareness Week. It starts when Daylight Saving Time ends. This is the day we “spring forward” an hour. It’s a good chance to reset your sleep pattern if you need to add more healthy habits to your bedtime routine.

Sometimes people may have health conditions that keep them from sleeping well. These are called [sleep disorders](#). They can include insomnia, narcolepsy, restless leg syndrome and sleep apnea. If you think you might have a sleep disorder, speak with your doctor. Healthy Connections Medicaid members with some sleep disorders

can get devices to help them sleep if they meet certain criteria. Devices include continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) and bi-level positive airway pressure (BIPAP) machines. Apnea monitors are also covered in necessary situations for infants or someone with respiratory issues. Full-benefit members ages 18 or over with mild obstructive sleep apnea may be covered to receive a device that helps improve nighttime breathing.

Choosing a Heart Healthy Lifestyle

February is the month of love. Between Valentine's Day and American Heart Month, there are plenty of ways to show love and appreciation not just to others, but to ourselves. Now is the time to practice self-love by checking in on our heart health. There are [proactive steps](#) we can take to prevent heart disease.

- Be more active. Getting enough exercise lowers your risk of heart disease and stroke. This includes small changes like taking the stairs or parking further away. Being active can also help you stay a healthy weight, which is important for your overall health.
- Keep an eye on your cholesterol. Higher levels increase the risk of developing heart disease. Limiting alcohol to less than two drinks a day lowers your overall cholesterol.
- Have a balanced meal plan. Eating better can lower blood pressure. Eat food with low saturated fat and sodium like unprocessed foods and lean meat.
- Stop smoking. Any amount of smoking hurts your heart and blood vessels. Joining a support group or talking with your doctor can help you quit smoking. The South Carolina [Tobacco Quitline](#) has free services to offer support.
- Get quality sleep. A lack of sleep raises your blood pressure and risk of heart disease. Aiming for seven to nine hours of sleep a night can reduce stress and other medical conditions.
- Manage your blood sugar and pressure. Keeping stable levels is crucial for heart health. Doing self-checkups with a blood pressure monitor and checking your blood sugar levels with your doctor all help make sure you are staying in a healthy range.

It's important to discuss your heart health with your doctor during your Medicaid-covered well visits.



Saving Lives Through Giving Blood

Every January, [National Blood Donor Month](#) raises awareness about the need to give blood. Each year, there are 6.8 million people across the country who donate blood. It takes about one hour to donate a pint of

blood. Here are [some facts you should know](#) before donating.

1. **Who will it help?** Emergency room, cancer, surgery and blood disorder patients will directly benefit from your donation in an emergency.
2. **Diversity in blood is vital.** Patients are most likely to find a safe match from donors of the same race or ethnicity. Because of this, a variety of donors is important.
3. **How does my donation help?** One donation can be separated into red blood cells, plasma and platelets. This means your donation can help several patients with different needs. One pint can save multiple lives.
4. **How can I benefit?** Donating blood includes a free health check. A regular blood donation can reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer. It can also help keep your iron levels regulated.

There tend to be fewer donations during the winter months. Cold weather can cause blood drive cancellations. Seasonal illnesses can lead to less people being able to donate too. Remember, giving blood is a simple act of kindness that can make a big difference. Schedule an appointment through [the American Red Cross](#) or [the Blood Connection](#).

Kidney Disease Management

About [5.2%](#) of adults in South Carolina were reported to have kidney disease in 2024. That's higher than the national average of 3.9%. Our kidneys are two fist-sized organs that clean toxins and waste out of our blood. When a disease or condition hurts kidney function, it can cause [chronic kidney disease \(CKD\)](#). Conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes and some autoimmune diseases can cause the damage that prompts CKD.

If it goes untreated, CKD can lead to something more severe. This is called kidney failure. It's a condition when one or both kidneys don't work on their own anymore. In 2024, acute kidney failure was the fifth-leading cause of hospitalization in South Carolina. The [American Kidney Fund](#) found there are more than 14,000 people with kidney failure in our state. With the proper treatment, these people can still have a good quality of life while [managing](#) kidney failure.

Many people in the early stages of CKD may not feel sick. They may not have any symptoms. Those people might not know they have it until it is in an advanced stage. Symptoms usually happen slowly. When CKD is advanced, there can be signs. They include nausea, vomiting and fatigue. You could also have sleep problems, high blood pressure and less mental sharpness.

Doctors can find CKD through blood and urine tests. If you have a health concern that raises your risk, your doctor may want to check your kidneys. Healthy Connections Medicaid adult members are covered for a well visit once every two years.

If someone enters kidney failure, they will need to get dialysis. This is a treatment that helps the body remove extra fluid and waste from the blood when the kidneys can't do it. Dialysis is covered for Medicaid members. Members with end-stage renal disease (ESRD) may qualify for Medicare. ESRD is permanent kidney failure requiring regular dialysis or a kidney transplant. Learn more about the qualifications to be covered by Medicare for those with ESRD at [Medicare.gov](#).

Glaucoma Awareness

Glaucoma is a leading cause of vision loss and blindness in the United States. But more than half of people don't know they have the disease. January is a month that raises awareness about glaucoma. This eye disease can cause vision loss if it is not found and treated early. It harms the optic nerve, which carries visual information from the eye to the brain.



Many people with glaucoma have no symptoms at first.

According to the [National Eye Institute \(NEI\)](#), anyone can get glaucoma. People who are 60 years or older and have a family history of the disease have a higher risk of getting glaucoma. Other health conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure put them at more risk as well.

Healthy Connections Medicaid covers eye exams and other vision services. Routine eye exams can help find glaucoma early since it often has no warning signs at first. Early detection with treatment can slow or prevent vision loss. Treatment may include eye drops, medicine or other care from an eye care provider.

Members who have questions about their vision benefits should contact their health plan. Their plan can help them find an eye doctor too. To learn more about glaucoma, visit the [NEI website](#).

Getting Screened for Colorectal Cancer

Not counting some types of skin cancer, colorectal cancer is the [fourth most common](#) cancer in the US. It is also the fourth-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the country. The colon is part of the large intestine. The rectum is at the end of it. They are both part of our digestive system.

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. One of the best things you can do to check on the health of your colon and rectum is to get a screening. It helps doctors search for a disease when a person does not show symptoms. It also helps to find abnormal growths called polyps. They can be removed before they turn into cancer.

Healthy Connections Medicaid members ages 45-75 can get screenings for colorectal cancer. This includes those in the Family Planning limited-benefit program. Medicaid covers both screening tests, like Cologuard, and colonoscopies. Cologuard is a preventive screening test. It can be taken at home. It's advised for people at low or average risk of colon cancer. A colonoscopy is an exam used to look for any changes like swelling, irritated tissues, polyps or cancer.

Most people should start screening soon after turning 45. There are a few reasons some people may need to start getting tested earlier. This can include:

- If you have inflammatory bowel disease like Crohn's or ulcerative colitis;
 - If you have a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps in the colon; and
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- If you have a genetic syndrome like [Lynch syndrome](#).
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Preventing Cervical Cancer



January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. A cervix is the small canal that connects a female's uterus to the vagina. It controls fluids leaving and entering the uterus.

The cervix is at risk for a virus called the human papillomavirus (HPV). There are different strands of HPV.

Some are deemed high risk because they can lead to cancer.

HPV is the [most common](#) viral sexually transmitted infection in the nation. It's so common that many who aren't vaccinated against it will become infected at some point in their lives. Many never know they have it. Talk to your doctor about their recommendations for male and female children getting the HPV vaccine. It protects against the cancers caused by HPV infections. Since the vaccine has been used in the United States, the number of cervical pre-cancers caused by HPV has dropped by 40% in HPV-vaccinated women.

In South Carolina, about 61% of teens ages 13-17 have gotten the HPV vaccine. The goal is to reach 80% by 2030. The HPV vaccine is covered for full-benefit and family planning Healthy Connections Medicaid members ages nine through 45.

Cervical cancer [once was](#) one of the most common causes of cancer death for American women. That rate has dropped by more than half since the mid-1970s. This is largely due to prevention and screening. Early detection can often stop HPV from leading to cervical cancer. Females should have routine gynecological visits and screenings as recommended by your doctor. One of the most common screenings is a Pap smear. Female Healthy Connections Medicaid members should speak with their doctor about the right time to get a Pap smear for themselves and their daughters.

Thank you for reading Healthy and Connected. Follow SCDHHS on our [Facebook](#) and [X](#) pages for regular updates. You can also [view the Medicaid Member Handbook](#) on SCDHHS' [website](#) to learn more about what is covered, where to go to ask questions and more.

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