

Winter 2023

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**Member Satisfaction in the
99th Percentile Again!**

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Making Biscotti with Bite



Aaron Van Huysen, CW04, USCG (Ret.), with Madyson Van Huysen, Olivia Bembry, and Victoria Van Huysen



winter calendar

DECEMBER

7

Hanukkah begins at sundown
Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day

21

Winter begins

25

Christmas Day

26

Kwanzaa begins

31

New Year's Eve

JANUARY

1

New Year's Day

15

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday



Our online Member Handbook
at usfamilyhealth.org is always
up to date!

FEBRUARY

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What did the groundhog see?

14

Valentine's Day



February is American Heart Month.
Find heart-healthy tips at heart.org.

19

Presidents Day

MARCH

10

Daylight Saving Time begins
(set clocks ahead)
Ramadan begins (est.)

17

St. Patrick's Day

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Spring begins

COMMUNITY



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FITNESS



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US Family Health Plan members choose from a network of over 2,000 civilian primary care providers and thousands of specialists, plus a large network of civilian hospitals.

Who We Are



US Family Health Plan of Southern New England is a Department of Defense TRICARE Prime option, and one of six regional US Family Health Plan programs across the nation. Our large network of civilian doctors, hospitals, and other health providers serves Plan members who live in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and parts of southern New Hampshire and northern Connecticut.

We pride ourselves on friendly, personal service. If you have questions, call us at **1.800.818.8589**. You can also get to know us better at usfamilyhealth.org or at facebook.com/USFHP.SouthernNewEngland.



a message from Susan Brown,
our Senior Vice President and Plan CEO



Grateful To Know You

My one-year anniversary at US Family Health Plan is fast approaching. And to say the time flew by would be an understatement. As we start the new year and move through the winter, I want to take a moment to say thank you for a full year of being able to serve, support, and know you.

I've learned an enormous amount about the Plan and about our members. I've been happy to have the opportunity to speak with many of you and learn what you like about the Plan and what you might like to see changed. I look forward to having opportunities to speak with more of you over the years to come.

Once again, you rated the Plan in the 99th percentile for member satisfaction among adult commercial health plans in the United States, according to the 2023 CAHPS® survey. It warms my heart on this cold winter day to know that we can provide you with the level of care that you need, when you need it, and where you need it. Although you consistently rate the health plan highly, please

know that this doesn't mean we feel we can sit back. We're always striving to do better for you. This degree of satisfaction keeps our entire Plan staff intent on continuing to provide services at this level.

Since I was born and brought up in New England, you would think I would be used to wintertime. But I truly believe I wasn't built to live in New England, as I would much rather be outdoors in my flip-flops. But there is one aspect of winter that I do appreciate, and that's the opportunity to spend more time with family.

To me there is something magical about having the family at home, a light snowfall, and the fire going. If only the snow could magically disappear overnight! My husband and I were lucky to have both kids under one roof, if only for a few days, during the holidays. Our daughter lives in California and could only get home for a short visit. We enjoyed the time we all got to spend together. I hope all of you had a great holiday season and spent time with your families too, making memories as I did this year. I'd like to think of all of you as family, and I look forward to many years of serving you and making memories.

Again, thank you for entrusting your health care to us. I wish you a wonderful, safe winter. ■

As we start the new year and move through the winter, I want to take a moment to say thank you for a full year of being able to serve, support, and know you.



FOCUS ON
SERVING

YOU

Even More Convenience

US Family Health Plan welcomes new primary care providers from **Cape Cod Healthcare** in Massachusetts, expanding the range of places for our members to find quality health care. The new PCPs are:

- Barbara Robinson, NP (Osterville)
774.552.3201
- Kimberly Small, NP (Hyannis)
774.552.3210
- Alexis Tressor, MD (Osterville)
774.552.3201



Stellar Satisfaction Ratings!

The CAHPS® 99th percentile

Once again, our members rated US Family Health Plan in the 99th percentile for member satisfaction among adult commercial health plans in the United States, according to the 2023 CAHPS® survey.

We're honored to have your confidence. Deep thanks to those of you who responded to the CAHPS® survey, which was mailed to a portion of our membership. Your responses let us know what we're doing well and where we can improve. And that's important to us. ■

Happy to Sponsor Military Events Throughout New England



Running Through Fall in Rhode Island

US Family Health Plan was among the sponsors of the **Veterans of Foreign Wars 5K and Fall Festival** October 14 in Wickford, Rhode Island. More than 150 runners joined in the beautiful fall run, and the event also included music, games, and special activities for the kids.

Wheeling Into the Sunset

The Plan also sponsored a car show at **MWR/Naval Station Newport**. Cars were displayed against a backdrop of beautiful views of Newport Bridge, Narragansett Bay, and the historic Naval War College.



Going After Quahogs in North Kingstown

Our Benefits Advisor Jethro Byron, SMSgt, USAF (Ret.) joined other Rhode Island veterans at a **Providence Vet Center** event filled with appreciation, community, and quahogs. The free event at North Kingstown Town Beach allowed participants, experienced or new to quahogging, to enjoy the activity in a relaxed and entertaining environment.



Want to Get Stronger Without Weights?

Try elastic resistance bands

You may be a fan of strength-training weights. Some people use them at a gym or have a set to work with at home. But what if gym membership isn't in your budget or you don't have enough room to keep a set at home?

Elastic resistance bands may be what you need. They're relatively inexpensive, easy to transport, and easy to use. They put stress on your muscles, just as weights do, making the muscles stronger over time.

They come in varieties: some are long, skinny tubes; and some are flat loops with colors that show resistance levels (light, medium, and heavy, for example).

Be Careful!

It's possible, but rare, for bands to snap back in your face, causing an eye injury. Avoid pulling a band toward your face and give the band a good look for tears.

The American College of Sports Medicine suggests the following starter exercises, recommending 8 to 12 repetitions of each one:

- **Row.** Sit on the floor with your legs extended in front of you. Loop the resistance band around the soles of your feet. Grip the band with your right hand and pull it toward your right hip while squeezing your shoulder blades together. Return to your starting position and repeat on your left side.
- **Deadlift.** Stand on the middle of a long-looped band with your feet hip-width apart. A loop of the band should poke out from under the sides of each foot. Squat down and grab each loop. Keeping your back flat, stand back up.

Be sure to talk with your doctor about starting up a new kind of exercise. ■



Charles Rollinger, MD, is our Vice President of Medical Management and Quality

Low Back Pain

Is imaging always necessary?

Every year the Defense Health Agency reviews our US Family Health Plan program. Part of the review is to evaluate whether our members are receiving appropriate care for their health. In the most recent review, it was found that our members receive more back imaging (X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs) than would be expected.

Learning to choose wisely

The American Board of Internal Medicine has a program called *Choosing Wisely*[®]. It is designed to educate providers and patients about using appropriate testing for medical treatment. One of the campaigns for this program is about imaging for low back pain. Back pain is the second most common reason people seek treatment from a primary care provider, and it often leads to X-rays or other imaging. That imaging isn't always necessary, though, and imaging itself has its own set of risks.

People would like to avoid unnecessary radiation exposure if they can, and X-rays and CT scans do expose people to radiation. There is also evidence that patients who have imaging of their back early in the treatment of back pain are more likely to undergo back surgery than those people who do not. But there is also no evidence that having imaging early in the treatment of back pain leads to better outcomes (less pain or better function) than not having early imaging of back pain. In fact, people

who have imaging and are given a diagnosis such as "Your X-ray shows arthritis of the back," are more likely to feel worse than those who are encouraged to be active. Studies show that bed rest can actually make back pain worse.


Red flags

Generally, it's a good idea to wait awhile (up to six weeks) after an episode of back pain to see if it improves without imaging. But sometimes imaging early on with back pain is the right thing to do. The guidelines in the *Choosing Wisely*[®] campaign call these "red flags." Red flags are:

- Severe neurologic symptoms such as numbness, tingling, or weakness in the legs, or wetting or soiling yourself after a back injury
- A traumatic injury like a fall or a car accident
- A history of cancer
- Fever and spine tenderness
- A history of back injury and osteoporosis (thin bones)
- Any serious underlying illness such as kidney disease or pancreatitis

If you feel a twinge in your back after heavy lifting, exercise, housework, or gardening it's likely to resolve itself without imaging being needed. But if you have any of the red flags above or other reasons to have imaging, it's best to consult with your primary care provider. Don't be surprised if they say that X-rays aren't needed. ■

If you feel a twinge in your back after heavy lifting, exercise, housework, or gardening it's likely to resolve itself without imaging being needed.



The Best Time to Get Help with Anxiety Attacks or PTSD?

Right now.

Pressure at work or school, financial or health care stress — lots of people feel the effects of life stress on their moods. But sometimes it's more than that. For people with anxiety attacks or symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to combat deployments and to other rough situations, it can be extra hard to manage when life gets hectic.

If you've been thinking of getting help for yourself or a family member, it's important to know that in addition to our other Behavioral Health services, US Family Health Plan covers a treatment for members that can be used right at home. Freespira is the only FDA-cleared, medication-free treatment for anxiety attacks and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. You don't have to see a health care provider to try it, and it takes only 28 days to complete.

How Freespira works

Freespira is more than breathing exercises. Over 28 days, the system takes you through a series of guided treatment sessions. The Freespira device provides real-time feedback that helps you learn what healthy breathing patterns feel like. ■

Participating in the Freespira pilot program

Eligible US Family Health Plan members may participate in the Freespira pilot program at absolutely no cost. If you're a Plan member and you're also receiving treatment from the VA, this doesn't affect your eligibility to participate in the Freespira pilot program.

Call **1.833.781.5508** to learn more about Freespira and your eligibility for the pilot program. ■



Getting Rid of Old or Unused Medications

Disposing of old or unused medication is complicated. Flushing it down the toilet might hurt the environment. Putting it in the trash can be risky to a child or pet. Holding on to it for future use isn't safe either, because expired medications may not work as well and can even be harmful.

Keep your family and community safe by disposing of leftover and unused medication *right away* and by cleaning out your medicine cabinet regularly.

- **Read the medication's label** or any patient information that comes with the medication to see if there are disposal instructions. Then follow them closely.
- **If your unused medications don't have disposal instructions**, take them to a local medication or take-back program. Call your local law-enforcement office to find an authorized site near you.
- **Call the authorized site to find out the hours that medications are accepted** and any specific instructions for dropping off the medications.



- **Don't put medications in your recycling bin.**
- **Check the FDA's authorized list of medications** that can be flushed down the sink or toilet. Don't flush any medicine not on the approved list. Go to [fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov) and enter "flushable medication" in the site's search box.
- **Keep in mind that these disposal methods can apply to over-the-counter medications, too.** These medications aren't less important than prescription medications. Treat them all the same when it comes to safe disposal.



Do you live in Rhode Island?

Some information applies specifically to Rhode Island residents:

- Lifespan's five pharmacies in Rhode Island provide "drop boxes" to allow safe disposal of medications. Go to "Medication Take Back" at [lifespan.org](https://www.lifespan.org) to find out more.
- Prevent Overdose RI at [preventoverdoseri.org/get-rid-of-meds/](https://www.preventoverdoseri.org/get-rid-of-meds/) contains a list of locations that take back medications.

Are there children in your home?

Safety recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics include:

- **Use medication containers with safety caps and keep them out of reach and sight of children.** Remember that safety caps are child-resistant, but no container is completely childproof.
- **Store over-the-counter and prescription medications in their original packages** in locked cabinets or containers.
- **Buy a small safe or lockbox** to lock up all medications.
- **Remind babysitters, grandparents, and other visitors to keep purses, bags, or jackets that have medications in them** away from children's reach. ■



Safe Toys and Gifts Month

December is a time for celebration, connection, and for many, gift giving. It's also Safe Toys and Gifts Month, a reminder to put safety first when choosing presents for children.

Read labels to understand the appropriate age range for a gift and look for the letters "ASTM." This means that the product meets the safety standards set by the American Society for Testing and Materials. And when buying toys, or when your children receive toys as gifts, check for:

- sharp edges
- parts that could fly off and injure an eye
- parts that could be choking hazards ■

Weight Loss May Help Reduce Cancer Risks

Recent research shows that adults with obesity who lost large amounts of weight through bariatric surgery significantly reduced their chances of developing cancer. The study, which followed more than 30,000 adults with obesity for ten years, found that the more weight the people with obesity lost, the more their cancer risk was reduced.

The study's authors speculated that the cancer-risk reduction would apply to people with obesity who lost weight through methods other than bariatric surgery, too. This could include diet, physical activity, or weight-loss medications. ■

Source: Aminian, A., et al., "Association of Bariatric Surgery with Cancer Risk and Mortality in Adults with Obesity." *JAMA*. 2022 Jun 28; 327(24):2423-2433.



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), someone with a body mass index (BMI) above 30 is considered obese.

cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult_bmi/english_bmi_calculator/bmi_calculator.html



Regular Sleep Patterns Can Help Shield Your Heart

Swinging back and forth between bedtimes and wake-up times — jolting awake to catch the 7 am bus on Friday and sleeping until 10 am on Saturday — takes a toll on our natural body rhythms.

Kelsie Full, PhD, of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, led a recent study that associates irregular sleep as an early marker of cardiovascular disease. A study of sleep data from 2,000 adults over age 45 found that subjects whose sleep amounts varied at night and who went to bed at different times were more likely to have hardened arteries than those who had more consistent sleep patterns.

How to improve your sleep routine? Focusing on your bedtime ritual (brushing your teeth, then reading for 15 minutes) can help lock in your schedule. Avoiding exercise and alcohol in the four hours before sleep can help, too. ■

Source: Full, K., et al., "Sleep Irregularity and Subclinical Markers of Cardiovascular Disease: The Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis," *Journal of the American Heart Association*. 2023 Feb 15; 12(4): e027361.



Massachusetts Community Behavioral Health Centers

US Family Health Plan now covers behavioral health crisis services provided by Massachusetts Community Behavioral Health Centers (CBHCs). CBHCs are one-stop shops for a wide range of behavioral health and substance use services and treatment. The statewide network includes 25 centers across Massachusetts offering immediate, confidential care around the clock. No referral is required, but a copayment may be necessary.

For more information, call or text **833.773.2445** or use the web chat at **masshelpline.com**. ■



Biscotti with Bite!

It's hard to turn down traditional biscotti with almonds and lemon zest, crisp and begging to be dipped in a hot cup of coffee. But this version takes biscotti a step further, with chocolate (two kinds!) and black pepper. A treat to wake up anyone with a penchant for a sweet and spicy combo.

Makes two dozen

- 1 ½ cups white flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- ¼ cup semi-sweet chocolate chips
- ½ cup unsalted butter, slightly softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons instant coffee powder
- 1 tablespoon medium-ground black pepper
- ¼ cup chopped almonds

Preheat oven to 350°.

Stir the flour, baking powder, and cocoa together in a medium-sized bowl. In a second, smaller bowl, mix the chocolate chips with a tablespoon of the flour mixture until the chips are coated.

In a large bowl, combine the butter and sugar until the mixture is thick and light colored. Add the eggs and coffee powder and keep mixing. Add the flour mixture to the butter and egg mixture and mix until it turns into a sticky dough. Gently stir in the pepper, chocolate chips, and chopped almonds.

Scrape the dough from the sides of the bowl, turn it out on a lightly floured surface, and shape it into a ball. Cut the ball into two pieces. Put the balls on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper, about 5 inches apart. Shape into two logs about 6 inches long and 2 to 3 inches wide, and slightly flatten the tops.

Bake for about 25 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Cool the loaves on a rack completely, cut into half-inch slices, and bake for 10 more minutes. Cool again and enjoy! ■



at ease

**Saying nothing, my Aunt Katie,
sometimes says the most.**

— Emily Dickinson



77 Warren Street
Boston, MA 02135



Bring It On!

Now that we're leaving fall color and warmth behind, it's time to get ready for New England at its most intense. Snow shovel, thickest gloves, safest boots — we'll be ready. We wish you well as you face the icy outdoors. We also wish you comfort in your favorite reading chair and plenty of time to share the holidays with loved ones.

Please remember that we'd like to know what you thought of this issue and what you'd like to read about in the months ahead. Get in touch at kerry.tucker@usfamilyhealth.org.

Kerry Tucker
Managing Editor/Senior Writer

Five Line Creative
Design

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