

How to keep your gallbladder

The gallbladder stores bile, a fluid that helps us digest fats. Bile is made at a steady rate by the liver, which sends it to the gallbladder to be stored and released when you eat a fatty meal. Bile is made up mostly of cholesterol and is a major way the body gets rid of excess cholesterol, as well as toxins.

All the blood that drains from the digestive tract goes directly through the liver, which is responsible for removing toxins, including medications. The liver has been described as “the oil filter of the body” because of this function. Once any impurities are collected and made less toxic by the liver, they are then deposited with the bile into the gallbladder, to be eliminated through the bowels.

But for many of us this system does not work so well. Gallstones are common; it has been estimated that 20 million Americans harbor them, and there are 700,000 surgeries every year to have them removed.

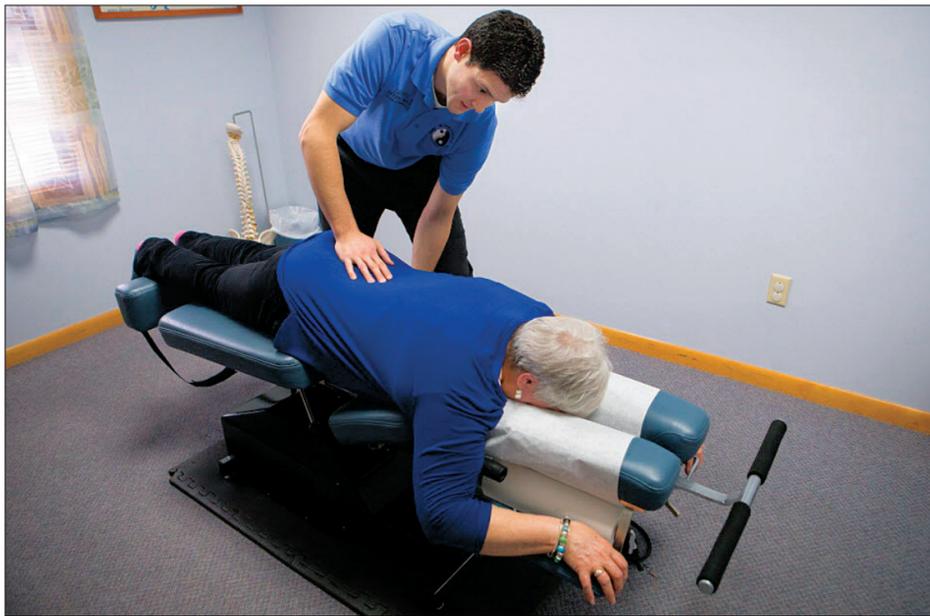
There are several theories about why so many of us develop gallstones. There is a genetic link, and they are associated with several medications, including hormone replacement therapy.

But like a lot of digestive problems, lifestyle is a major factor in their development. Gallstones are associated with a sedentary lifestyle, obesity, sugar consumption, low vegetable consumption and eating processed foods, especially fats. This includes hydrogenated fats, and fats used for frying. They may also be caused by rapid weight loss and very low fat diets; this is thought to be because of the fact that when there are no fats in the diet, bile is stored in the gallbladder for a long time, allowing it to solidify.

Most vegetable oils are not from vegetables at all but are highly processed seed oils that were consumed in relatively small quantities until recently, when the process of chemical extraction made them cheaper to produce. This is especially true of canola, soybean and corn oils. There is controversy about whether or not they contribute to gallstones. I avoid them, on the basis that they are a newer food, and there is some evidence they contribute to inflammation. This does not apply to olive oil, which I use a lot.

Poor fat digestion because of impaired gallbladder function is more common than actual gallstones. In the early stages of stone formation, the bile thickens, making it less effective at doing its job of dissolving dietary fats and inflaming the gallbladder. Many patients have vague pains in the right upper abdomen, sometimes associated with eating, bloating or gas, all of which may be because of an inflamed gallbladder; this can happen without any actual stones being present. Another symptom may be constipation; if the bile is not present in enough quantity to emulsify the fats, it

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Chiropractor Dan Myerowitz (left) applies pressure to Jean Mercer's back during a demonstration at the Myerowitz Chiropractic & Acupuncture Clinic in Holden on Wednesday.

Opioids or alternatives?

Surgery and snail venom may help some, but for others, medication is the only relief

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

Jean Mercer, 67, of Bucksport suffered for five years with debilitating pain that started with a bulging lumbar disc. She first noticed a tingling and loss of sensation in one leg, then shooting pain and a loss of control over her foot as the disc deteriorated.

An eight-week course of steroid injections didn't help. Surgery to remove the disc and fuse the adjacent vertebrae, followed by months of physical therapy, left her with no feeling in her hip and upper leg while the pain in her lower leg was unabated.

“All my activities just stopped,” the longtime teacher and Zumba enthusiast said in a recent interview. “I couldn't sit in a kayak or walk out the camp road. I couldn't have sex with my husband. I couldn't do anything with my grandchildren. I couldn't even lean over to brush my teeth.”

Over-the-counter pain medicines such as Advil and Alleve took the edge off her pain, but she was taking so much it started to affect her kidney function. Despite the intensity of her pain, she was unwilling to try stronger, opiate-based medicines such as Oxy-Contin, aware of the dangers of addiction, the potential for theft and the common side effects of drowsiness, nausea and severe constipation.

Finally, at the urging of her daughter, Mercer scheduled an appointment with Dan Myerowitz, a chiropractor in Holden. On that first appointment, she could barely make it through the door to his office. But after a half dozen treatment sessions, which included traditional, hands-on adjustments of her spine and pelvis as well as chiropractic acupuncture, her pain had diminished dramatically and her mobility was much improved.



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Chiropractor Dan Myerowitz inserts acupuncture needles in Jean Mercer's lower back during a demonstration at the Myerowitz Chiropractic & Acupuncture Clinic in Holden on Wednesday.

“It was a gift,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “I had been so desperate. I couldn't believe I was in so much less pain, so quickly.”

Alternatives to opioids

As Maine and the nation grapple with growing rates of opioid abuse and addiction, pressure is falling on doctors and other prescribers to change the way they manage patients with chronic pain. While two bills pending before the Maine legislature would make some changes mandatory, many health care providers say they already make a point of steering patients away from opioid medications and toward more comprehensive management of the underlying causes of their pain.

“Our model is to treat pain as a symptom, not a diagnosis,” said Dr. Ben Zolper, founder and medical director of Northeast Pain Management in Bangor. He has practiced pain management in Bangor for 23 years.

For most of Zolper's patients, especially those in midlife or older, the underlying diagnosis is

back injury, shoulder injury or joint dysfunction. Often, though not always, these are related to a lifetime of working in Maine's iconic employment sectors: fishing, farming, logging, papermaking and other activities that require heavy lifting, long hours and proximity to heavy equipment.

Zolper aims to restore his patients to functional lives, including getting back to work and maintaining family relationships and commitments. Instead of prescribing addictive opioid drugs, he typically recommends interventions such as steroid injections, joint fusion and a procedure called rhizotomy that selectively destroys nerve roots. Many, but not all patients, find relief from these strategies. Losing weight and improving overall fitness also can help considerably, he said.

Zolper said that only about 10 of the many patients under his care are being treated with opioid painkillers. He points out that existing rules developed by the Maine Board of Licensure in Medicine *See Opioid, Page C2*

What I learned at the senior center

I was pleased to have the opportunity to speak at a healthy living workshop earlier this week at the senior center in Bucksport. The event was coordinated by center director Sue Ann Craig, in conjunction with the Bucksport Bay Healthy Communities Coalition and local aging-in-place organizers.

Aging in place is the catchphrase used these days for the effort to help older Mainers stay in the home and community of their choice as long and as independently as possible, through systems that enhance safety, health, social engagement and other aspects of daily life. In broad strokes, these systems include affordable housing options, transportation services, access to health care and personal assistance as needed, opportunities to engage in community events and other considerations. Communities across Maine are getting on board with the need to adapt to their changing demographics — is yours?

Bucksport has been working at becoming age-friendly — safe and welcoming for older residents — for several years, thanks in large part to an active, engaged and self-advocating population of seniors, many of whom attended Tuesday's workshop.

The event featured two speakers, interim town manager Sue Lessard and me, with opportunities for discussion and a casual lunch. Lessard led off with a recap of Bucksport's progress and challenges in the aftermath of the 2014 closing of the Verso Paper mill, the town's leading employer. The audience listened intently, then challenged Lessard with questions relative to improving transparency in town governance, the frequency of transportation service to Bangor, the needs of adults with developmental challenges and the possibility of maintaining a year-round public restroom downtown to encourage shopping and the use of the city's inviting mile-long walkway along the bank of the Penobscot River.

Suddenly, in the face of these serious-minded ideas, the breezy Powerpoint presentation I had prepared on the topic of “active aging” seemed a little inane. Clearly, this group knew all about the benefits of staying active and engaged as we age. Nonetheless, with help from the town's digital media troubleshooter, we got the technology working and I fired up my inexpert slideshow.

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, I think it went OK. It helped that I have a long and abiding affection for the town of Bucksport, which I came to know in the relatively prosperous days of the early 1970s, when I first moved to Maine. I told my audience about driving across the old Waldo-Hancock suspension bridge, recently replaced by the *See Haskell, Page C2*



MEG HASKELL

Needlecrafting in childhood leads to a lifetime of creativity

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

ORRINGTON — The weather outside was cold and gray, but inside Stacey Van Dyne's ranch-style home in Orrington one recent Saturday the atmosphere was warm and full of color. With a rainbow of bright-hued wools, Van Dyne and a group of five other women worked fanciful flowers, birds and other motifs onto linen and hemp backing, using the simple, punch-and-pull technique of traditional rug hooking.

Van Dyne, 57, a nationally certified rug hooking instructor, moved quietly around the room, pausing to consult on a subtle color transition, admire a tidy edging and commiserate over a tricky design. The room glowed with color, laughter and conversation as the women chatted and their rugs, loop by loop, took shape.

Originally developed as a frugal

housewife's clever solution for using up odd scraps of fabric, rug hooking has evolved into a popular creative craft and even an art form. Rug hookers at every level of expertise, from tentative beginners to skilled professionals, enjoy the visual and tactile pleasure of working with the materials to create objects of beauty.

Van Dyne works as an administrative assistant at a Bangor-area financial management company. But the living room at her Hooked Forever home studio is fully given over to her craft and the classes she teaches; it is clear where her passion lies.

“I imagine I'll retire in another five or 10 years, or whenever I win the Powerball,” she said. And when that day comes, she dreams of taking her craft on the road, teaching at workshops in different areas of the U.S. and Canada.

“In 1993, when I first decided I wanted to teach, I wasn't certified. I just hung my shingle out,” she said. But as she continued to ad-



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Ann Henderson hooks pieces of wool to make a design during a class at Stacey Van Dyne's home studio in Orrington recently.

vance her own expertise, she was encouraged to pursue certification through the National Guild of Pearl K. McGown Hookcrafters. Now, she is qualified to lead large

workshops, consult on repairs and research the histories of old hand-hooked rugs.

Van Dyne's passion for hooking rugs evolved from a childhood

spent practicing needlework.

“We always did needle crafts,” she said of her growing-up years in Orrington. “I had four sisters, and our mother kept us all busy with handwork.” Sewing and cross-stitch were her favorites, until she and her mother tried hooking a rug together when Van Dyne was about 16 years old. From then on, hooking has been her go-to activity, gradually consuming more and more of her time and attention.

In addition to the small classes she hosts at her home, Van Dyne teaches at regional workshops, which typically attract more than 200 crafters from the U.S. and Canada.

Coming up on May 7, Van Dyne will host a daylong “hook-in” at the Brewer Elks Club. Rug hookers of all levels of experience are welcome. The event will feature small workshops, vendors and more. Admission is \$20. For more information, call Stacey Van Dyne at 299-4593.