

# Four reasons to get a flu shot

BY MEG HASKELL  
BDN STAFF

Each fall, flu season returns to Maine, and with it comes a wave of serious illness and death among older Mainers. Last year, according to disease surveillance data from the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 2,400 Mainers tested positive for the potentially serious influenza virus. Of these, nearly 400 were sick enough to be hospitalized. The average age of those hospitalized was 55 years.

But that's just the cases that were reported — thousands of other Mainers were sickened but not tested and, thus, were not counted in the statistics available. Also, it's important to note that the balmy 2015-2016 season was an especially light year for flu in Maine.

During the 2014-15 season, the Maine CDC reported more than 4,200 positive test results.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not track flu-related deaths directly, but it estimates that between 3,000 and 49,000 people in this country die each year of complications related to influenza. Ninety percent of flu-related deaths occur in people 65 and older, the agency estimates.

Still, although the flu vaccine is recommended for just about everyone over the age of six months — this year, even those with egg allergies — lots of people never get the annual flu vaccine. According to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, flu vaccine rates nationwide and in Maine hover year to year between 40 to 60 percent. In Maine, uptake for all ages is highest in southern and coastal counties and lowest — below 40 percent — in Aroostook, Piscataquis and Washington counties.

## Why so low?

For a largely preventable disease that has the potential to cause serious illness and death — not only in baby boomers and frail seniors but also in babies, young children, pregnant women and individuals of all ages with chronic health conditions — these rates are unacceptably low.

According to Elaine Beaulieu, public health program manager at Bangor Public Health and Community Services, there are a number of reasons older adults don't get their annual flu vaccines. One of them is transportation.

"If you don't get your flu shot as part of your regular visit with your primary care provider, it can mean another trip," she said.

Another issue is cost. Though Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance typically cover all or most of the cost of a flu shot, even a modest co-pay can be a problem for some people. For those with no health coverage at all, a vaccine can typically cost between \$25 and \$45, though it's worth shopping around for a lower cost option.

There are those who will swear the shot gives them the flu, even though the killed-virus vaccine cannot do so. "It can make you feel a little under the weather," Beaulieu acknowledged. "But it can't give you a full-fledged case of the flu."

And, she said, there are the "anti-vaxxers" — individuals philosophically opposed to the very idea of vaccinations. Their reasons range from religious beliefs to disproven notions that vaccines are linked with au-

*See Shot, Page C2*



ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE DANBY

# Risk or benefit?

Study says sex may be dangerous for older men. Pros disagree.

BY MEG HASKELL  
BDN STAFF

Is it healthy to pursue an active sex life as we age? The answer depends on whom you ask.

Medical professionals, optimists and public opinion have long held that the many benefits of sex outweigh the limited drawbacks. But a recent study calls all that into question, raising the possibility that sexually active older men, in particular, are at significantly greater risk for developing heart attacks, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems than their less-active male peers.

For older women, on the other hand, the study shows that "extremely pleasurable or satisfying" sex appears to protect against cardiovascular disease.

The researchers analyzed information from more than 2,200 men and women who participated in the National Social Life, Health and Aging project at the University of Chicago. They looked at data on sexual activity, including the frequency and satisfaction of partnered sex, and cardiovascular risk, including blood pressure, rapid heart rate, medications and laboratory measures indicating heart damage. The information was gathered at two points in time, first when the subjects were between 57 and 85 years old and again five years later.

Men who reported having sex with a partner once per week or

more often in the first data set were almost twice as likely to have experienced cardiovascular problems, including heart attack, heart failure and stroke, in the second.

"Strikingly, we find that having sex once a week or more puts older men at a risk for experiencing cardiovascular events that is almost two times greater than older men who are sexually inactive," said principal investigator Hui Liu, associate professor of sociology at Michigan State University, in a press release. "Moreover, older men who found sex with their partner extremely pleasurable or satisfying had higher risk of cardiovascular events than men who did not feel so."

Liu said the study suggests the "strains and demands" of sex may overtax men's cardiac health, particularly as they "get older, become increasingly frail and suffer more sexual problems [such as erectile dysfunction and difficulty reaching orgasm]."

Women in the study who initially reported that sex was extremely pleasurable or satisfying had a lower incidence of high blood pressure five years later compared to women who did not. The findings were not altered by the frequency of their sexual encounters.

"For women, we have good news," Liu said. "Good sexual quality may protect older women from cardiovascular risk in later life."

The report, "Is sex good for your

health? A national study on partnered sexuality and cardiovascular risk among older men and women," was published in the September issue of the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, the peer-reviewed research journal of the American Sociological Association.

However, as is the case with most research, the study is far from conclusive. The researchers acknowledge numerous limitations and call for additional research to further determine causality, the interplay between emotional and physical well-being and "the precise mechanisms and processes through which sexuality affects men and women's cardiovascular health."

## Sex: It's 'very human and normal' at any age

But, of course, there's more to sex and sexuality than bedroom performance and lab values.

"The benefits of sexual activity as people age are physiological, emotional, psychological and functional," said Bangor physician Sufana Alkhunaizi, a geriatric specialist with St. Joseph Healthcare. That's why she makes a point of bringing the sometimes sensitive issue up with her patients during their annual physicals.

"It's easier for men to talk about it than women," she said, noting that older men often are interested in obtaining medication to treat

*See Sex, Page C2*

# Here's the recipe for contentment in my kitchen

I adore Facebook. I use it all the time to keep tabs on what my friends are doing and thinking and also to share bits of news and culture, adorable puppy videos and glimpses of my own life. Once in awhile, I will admit, I even post a picture of what I'm eating. Usually,

that happens because I'm at some quirky or interesting restaurant. But earlier this week, I posted an appreciative photo of a particularly handsome quiche my husband, Douglas, made for our supper.

"Who is this man that prepares me a crabmeat-kale-tofu quiche in a crust of brown rice and sweet corn, sprinkled over with fresh Parmesan and Italian cheeses?" I wrote in wonderment. "All while beating me at Upwords????"

So many friends responded, I decided to share the recipe here, along with a bit of context and more appreciation.

Douglas is a capable and inventive cook. It was one of the first attributes he shared with me after we met in 2011 on Match.com, possibly because I had mentioned in my profile that I hoped to meet a man who could not only hold his own in the kitchen but also help me reclaim my own culinary enthusiasms. Frankly, I was burned out from making hasty, utilitarian meals during my 30-year marriage. I truly missed the sensual pleasures of the kitchen and the satisfaction of preparing simple, nourishing, interesting food, but I didn't want to be the chief cook and bottle washer anymore. I dreamed of finding a partner for the kitchen, as well as for the rest of my life.

Douglas has many charms, but among them is his genuine ease in the kitchen. On our second date, he invited me to his house for dinner, serving up simple grilled salmon, fresh steamed greens and a pilaf of brown rice, toasted pine nuts and chopped vegetables. I'm no pushover, but I'll admit, that evening I swooned just a bit.

Since then, he has planned and prepared many, if not most, of our meals, including weekend breakfasts and picnic lunches. He does almost all of our grocery shopping. He's no gourmet cook; his default supper dish is a one-dish concoction he modestly refers to as "glop" — an infinitely variable and always appealing combination of rice or pasta, a bit of meat or fish and a healthy measure of some green vegetable, cooked up together with some pesto, balsamic vinegar or other seasoning.

But he can also put together a savory lamb stew, a big salad with crumbled feta cheese and Greek olives or a fresh tomato sauce over slices of grilled eggplant. On instinct, he'll toss in a handful of almonds, a few raisins or a sprinkle of pine nuts. He rarely consults a recipe. It's always tasty,

*See Haskell, Page C2*



MEG HASKELL

# Quirky parade labor of love for Belfast woman

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS  
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BELFAST — Every morning, Mary Weaver uses eyeliner to carefully draw a dot above and below each eye, dots that give the longtime theater director something of the look of an eccentric harlequin trying to go undercover in a small New England city.

"This is my point of view. This is how I get perspective," Weaver, who is in her 70s, said this week. "And it's really important I do it, because when I do it, I smile."

Generating smiles — on her own and on other people's faces — is a big motivator for the self-proclaimed hippie and back-to-the-lander who came to Maine from Manhattan in the 1970s to be a farmer. Farming didn't last long for her, but Maine did. Weaver has produced theater in Belfast since the early 1980s, with perhaps her longest-running production being the Church Street Festival and parade that take place every year on the first Saturday of October.

But this weekend's event, her 34th, may be the last one that she organizes. It might also be the last one ever — unless someone else steps up



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to take charge of the quirky, homespun festival.

"This is a unique, without any reason, parade," she said. "This is for fun. This is to be zany. Or, on a more serious level, it started out just as a thing that was fun. But I've learned that it's important for young people to stop everything and put on something silly, to walk the streets of their town and have a party."

Weaver said that organizing the festival doesn't necessarily take a lot of time. She gets rolling only a week or so before it happens, she said. But it does happen to take up a lot of real

estate in her barn and her High Street home, thanks to the puppets, floats, costumes, masks, props and more she stores there.

On a quick tour, Weaver takes the dust sheets off Bella the Big Pink Elephant, the mascot of the parade, and shows off the huge clown puppet that she will wear on Saturday, Oct. 1. There are costumes that will transform people into ants, flamingos, butterflies or dragons. There are sequins and sparkles and fabric that shines in the afternoon light. There is so much, and Weaver

*See Parade, Page C2*

Mary Weaver, who has worked for decades to put on the Church Street Festival in Belfast, said that this year's event will be her last as festival organizer.