

HEALTH **U**



Hackensack
Meridian *Health*

*Is a plant-based diet
right for you?*

page 7

HOW TO
LIMIT YOUR
CHILD'S
SCREEN TIME

page 9

Stay Healthy This Fall

**ARE COLONOSCOPIES
REALLY THAT BAD?**

page 10

**GROUNDBREAKING TREATMENT
FOR PATIENTS EXPERIENCING
ESSENTIAL TREMOR**

page 18

PARA LEER ESTA
REVISTA EN
ESPAÑOL, VISITE
[HMHforU.org/
Spanish3](https://HMHforU.org/Spanish3).

*5 things you should never say to
someone with depression or anxiety*

page 6

Are Cortisone Shots Bad for You?

Cortisone shots provide immense relief from pain and decrease inflammation, but they aren't for every person in every situation. Here's what you should know.

Many people have had cortisone shots—sometimes called steroid shots—to relieve pain and improve function for sports injuries like tendinitis and meniscus tears, as well as chronic conditions like arthritis, bursitis and carpal tunnel syndrome. These injections can provide immense relief from pain and promote healing, but they aren't for every person in every situation.

Orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist **Kenneth G. Swan, M.D.**, breaks down what you need to know.

How do cortisone shots work? Cortisone is a powerful and focused inflammatory medication. When an injury or medical condition includes swelling, cortisone shots can provide intense, localized relief without the full-body exposure to medications that over-the-counter products like aspirin and ibuprofen can cause.

How long before you get relief from pain? Cortisone can take up to several days to provide relief. Because of that, Dr. Swan and other physicians often include a local anesthetic in the shot to provide immediate relief until the cortisone kicks in.

How long does the relief last? The relief provided by the cortisone can last anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.

What are the possible side effects of cortisone shots? While cartilage damage, bone death, joint infection and nerve damage are possible, if the shot is done by an experienced doctor, those complications are exceedingly rare. More common but still rare side effects can include temporary facial flushing, a temporary flare of pain and inflammation



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in the joint, and temporary skin lightening when the shot is near the surface and the person has dark skin tones. In addition, a temporary increase in blood sugar can occur, especially in patients who have poorly controlled diabetes.

Do cortisone shots work for everyone? Some patients respond better than others, and in some cases, there is no noticeable improvement from the treatment.

Do you have to be a certain age to get cortisone shots? Younger people and children will often heal without these shots, so cortisone is probably not an appropriate way to get them back into sports before they heal. Older patients who are not candidates for surgical treatment of their injury or chronic condition may benefit from one or a series of shots.

Do cortisone shots hurt? Shots in small joints like fingers and feet can be quite painful; shots in knees, shoulders and hips are much less so. Your doctor has topical treatments that can be used to minimize discomfort.

After an injury, should I get a cortisone shot right away? A lot of things get better on their own within a couple of weeks. If you are in pain, give it a few weeks to heal on its own. If you are in a lot of pain, consult your doctor about which treatment options are the best for your situation. 🌀

Go Online
Learn more about care after a sports injury at [HMHforU.org/Sports](https://www.hmhforu.org/Sports).

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Step by Step



A sudden stroke put Fran Hudak in a wheelchair. The Stroke Recovery Program at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute is helping her regain mobility.

Fran Hudak from Old Bridge, New Jersey, was shopping with her husband, Mike, on Memorial Day weekend in 2019 when she started to feel unwell. At first, the 66-year-old blamed it on the sleeping medication she'd recently started taking, but she soon suspected something else was at fault.

Mike suggested a visit to the hospital. "After 48 years together, you just know when something's not right," he says.

Mike took Fran to the emergency room at **JFK University Medical Center**. There, it was determined that she was experiencing a series of transient ischemic attacks (TIA), which are temporary blockages of blood flow to the brain. Thankfully, she was still in the emergency room later that night when she experienced a full stroke. Fran spent a few days in the hospital's stroke unit before being transferred to **JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute** for inpatient treatment.

Her stroke, which was on the left inner part of her brain, affected the right side of her body. She required a wheelchair at first but moved to a walker as she began to regain strength.

Fran's rehabilitation didn't end when she went home. She continued as an outpatient as part of the Stroke Recovery Program at JFK Johnson. The program offers personalized physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology, rehabilitation psychology and audiology services, among other rehabilitation specialists.

A Team Approach
The Stroke Recovery Program provides a seamless transition of care from the hospital to outpatient rehab and helps patients get the support they need as they progress in their recovery. "We designed our program where early on patients get more support



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compared to traditional follow-up, and that support continues as their needs change as time passes," says **Talya Fleming, M.D.**, medical director of the Stroke Recovery Program.

Together, Fran and Dr. Fleming pick a short-term goal to work toward; when that goal is reached, they move to the next one. Part of that process is to educate patients like Fran that there's a next step in their recovery. With the help of her multidisciplinary team, Fran has improved her mobility and coordination. She no longer needs a walker and instead uses a cane as needed.

A year after the stroke, Fran started seeing **Craig Van Dien, M.D.**, sports medicine and physical medicine and rehabilitation physician at JFK Johnson, because of shoulder pain. "As patients move through the Stroke Recovery Program, we want to optimize their recovery, so sometimes we have to focus on the pain that develops as a consequence of stroke," says Dr. Van Dien, who successfully treated Fran's shoulder pain with an ultrasound-guided injection of steroids.

Road to Recovery
Recovering from a stroke can be a lengthy and challenging process. "I can't do a lot of things that I used to do, and I find that very frustrating," says Fran. "But we're very satisfied with JFK Johnson and the rehab procedures they have in place that are helping me."

Adds Dr. Fleming: "Everyone's stroke is different, and everyone's recovery after stroke is different. That's why it's important to have a treatment team that can grow with you and adjust goals based on what you need at that particular time."

Learn more about the Stroke Recovery Program at JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute at [HMHforU.org/StrokeRecovery](https://www.hmhforu.org/StrokeRecovery).