

SPRING 2026

Health Smarts



Nourishing Body, Mind and Heart

Banner Olive Branch's
programs create a safe,
welcoming space

 Banner Health Network

Welcome

We hope the stories in this spring issue of Health Smarts encourage you to take small, meaningful steps toward feeling stronger, more confident and well-supported in your health. Spring is a season of renewal — a time to check in with your body, refresh your daily routines and focus on habits that help you stay independent and well.

In our feature story, we highlight Banner Olive Branch Senior Center. What began as a small food program has grown into a vibrant community hub that offers nutritious meals and groceries, grief programs and wellness classes, including chair yoga. Banner Olive Branch provides older adults with a welcoming place to stay active, connected and supported.

This issue also focuses on ways to protect your strength and health as you age. You'll find guidance on preventing undernutrition. We explore how to thrive with diabetes in your later years, manage allergies and recognize when symptoms may signal a heart valve problem. You'll also learn more about cancer screening, including when it may still be helpful and when it may be appropriate to stop. Our goal is to help you feel informed and empowered to have thoughtful conversations with your care team.

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If you have questions about your health or where to get care, our nurses are here for you 24/7. Call the Banner Health Nurse On-Call line at 602-747-7990 or toll-free at 888-747-7990.



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Shown on cover: Good health starts with healthy food. Center director Jennifer Lawless helps a member stock up on nutritious options at the Banner Olive Branch Senior Center in Sun City, AZ.



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Nourishing Body, Mind and Heart



Banner Olive Branch's programs create a safe and welcoming space for older adults

By Regan Olsson

By the time the doors open in the morning at the Banner Olive Branch Senior Center, people are already lining up. Some come for groceries. Others arrive early for breakfast, a familiar class or a quiet place to sit and read or talk.

What brings them through the doors may differ, but the reason they return is often the same: this is a place where people feel seen. That sense of belonging has been in the making for more than three decades.

Founded in 1988, Banner Olive Branch began as a modest food program operating out of a local church. Today, in its third year at a new location in Sun City, AZ, it serves thousands of seniors each year, providing everything from meals to wellness programs. And its food pantry, part of the St. Mary's Food Bank network, distributes well over a million pounds of food annually.

"Our vision is to be a warm and welcoming place for anyone 60 and older," said Jennifer Lawless, director of Banner Olive Branch. "Our job is to make it as easy as possible for people to get the help they need. And if we don't know the answer, we find it."

A growing need for basic support

The most visible sign of that growing need is the food pantry.

In just a few short years at their new location, daily pantry visits have climbed from about 100 to more than 400. The pantry is open three mornings a week and is available to adults 18 and older, while most programs are for those 60 and up.

Thanks to a recent \$100,000 investment from WISH (Women Investing in Supporting Health), Olive Branch is now able to offer social services right within the pantry, making it not only a place for groceries but also a space for connection and support.

"There has been a 10% increase in visitors to the center and a 55% increase in food pantry use," Lawless said. "That's eye-opening."

Much of the food comes from partnerships with local grocery stores through rescue and redistribution programs. Nothing goes to waste, and in the process, millions of pounds of food that might otherwise end up in landfills are redirected to people who need it.

But Lawless is quick to point out that food is only part of the picture.

"Many of the people we serve are living on fixed incomes, managing chronic health issues, and dealing with isolation," she said. "Food insecurity is often connected to much bigger challenges."

That understanding has shaped how Banner Olive Branch approaches its programming — not just addressing physical needs but also emotional and social ones.

Making space for grief—of all kinds

One of the newer programs drawing people deeper into the center is Doing Grief, a community-based grief initiative led by Shea Darian, author of *Doing Grief in Real Life: A Soulful Guide to Navigate Loss, Death & Change*.

Darian's work grew from decades in spiritual care and family education, where she noticed something that rarely gets named.

"Everyone was grieving something," she said. "Not just death, but divorce, family conflict, addiction, injury, loss of identity. Grief touches every part of our lives."

After many years of studying grief, Darian developed what she calls an adaptive grieving compass, a model that recognizes four different types of grieving responses people move among throughout the grieving process. Her programs are designed to engage all of them — not just talking, but creating, reflecting, connecting and finding meaning.

"At Banner Olive Branch, people come in carrying heavy things," Darian said. "And what's remarkable is that they often leave feeling lighter — even if the grief is still there."

Doing Grief offerings include small healing circles, story circles focused on shared themes, grief education sessions, creative arts programs and spiritual enrichment experiences such as meditation and prayer samplers. All are open and inclusive. There is no required fee, but donations are gladly accepted to support the programs.

Maya Knowles discovered the program almost by accident, after attending a drumming class she read about in the local paper. What she found there quickly became something more meaningful.

"My experience with the Doing Grief community was easy because everyone was so welcoming," Knowles said. "I found that grief is something everyone is experiencing. Aging, loss of family and friends, disappointment — it all counts."

She was drawn to the many ways the program makes space for grief, whether through quiet reflection, creativity or shared conversation.

"My loneliness found a resource where I could find community," Knowles said. "I met people in these classes who were alone in their struggles. Having programs like these provides a lifeline and is immensely important in our senior community, where so many of us live alone and face aging issues."

Cheri Thomas had a similar experience.

"Shea's Grief Model is truly a gift to the world. She offers a holistic approach through a variety of classes that come from her own authentic grief journey," Thomas said. "There's laughter, tears and a deep sense of inclusivity and compassion. She creates a safe space for everyone involved."

Moving the body, lifting the spirit

Just down the hall, a different kind of healing is happening ... one chair at a time.

Chair yoga, led by Heike Newman, a registered yoga teacher, is now one of the most popular offerings at Banner Olive Branch, regularly filling up and maintaining a waiting list. The class meets twice a month, and participants range widely in age, ability and experience.

"People come in with walkers, canes or just uncertainty," Newman said. "The message is always the same: Do what you can, be kind to your body and don't compare yourself to anyone else."

Newman, who works at Banner Boswell Medical Center and has spent her career in health care, began offering yoga during the pandemic to counter isolation and fear. That spirit of service continues at Olive Branch, where the class is provided through volunteer time.

One moment still stands out to her. A woman in her 90s requested a piece of music during relaxation — the same song that had been played at her husband's funeral earlier that year.

"She had tears streaming down her face," Newman said. "She told me it was exactly what she needed."

Another longtime participant, now 95, once relied heavily on a cane. Today, she practices standing balance.

"It's like watering a plant," Newman said. "People come alive."

For Kay Woods, who has attended both chair yoga and grief programs and recently lost a son, the impact is deeply personal.

"She's helping me heal," Woods said simply.

She credits the classes with giving her tools she can take home — breathing techniques, moments of calm — and something just as important: a place where she doesn't feel alone.

"This feels like a safe place," Woods said. "You don't feel awkward walking in by yourself. It feels like home."

More than a senior center

That sense of belonging is something Lawless hears often and something she sees as central to the center's mission.

As Banner Olive Branch moves into its third year at its new location, the needs it serves continue to grow — from food access to grief support, from movement to connection.

"Our goal is to keep educating people about what we can do here and keep getting better at it," Lawless said. "Because when people walk through the doors, they're not just looking for services. They're looking for support."

And for many in the Sun Cities, that support begins and often continues at Banner Olive Branch.

To learn more about the food pantry, grief programs, chair yoga and other free or low-cost services, call 623-465-6000 or Google "Banner Olive Branch" for current schedules and resources.





Preventing undernutrition starts at home

10 diet tips to support energy, strength and healthy aging

By Regan Olsson

You might notice that eating doesn't feel the same as it used to. Maybe food doesn't taste as good, your appetite comes and goes, or cooking feels like too much work some days.

These small changes happen often as you get older, but they might also be early signs that your body isn't getting enough nutrition.

Undernutrition happens when you don't get enough calories or

nutrients. It can cause low energy, slower healing, weaker muscles, and problems with balance and moving.

This happens more often than you might think. Research shows that about 1 in 10 older adults living independently at home experience this. The risk rises to 5 in 10 for those living in nursing homes.

"Many seniors and families aren't aware how quickly nutrition can change as you age," said Julie Ash, a

community outreach representative with Banner Olive Branch Senior Center. "Sometimes it's due to dental issues, limited mobility, social isolation or simply not feeling hungry."

Other causes include memory changes, chronic health conditions, medicines that affect appetite and having a limited food budget.

The good news is that there are a few simple things you can do to help you get back on track.

1. Eat regular meals and snacks

Many people feel better when they eat smaller meals throughout the day. Try having three balanced meals and two snacks every day to keep your energy steady.

2. Make every bite count

Eat foods rich in nutrients like protein, whole grains, fruits, vegetables and healthy fats like avocado and olive oil. These foods give your body energy and help your muscles, heart and brain work well.

3. Include protein with every meal

Protein helps keep your muscles strong. To get more protein, include foods like eggs, yogurt, cheese, chicken, nut butter, beans and tofu in each meal.

4. Choose foods that are easier to chew

If chewing or dental pain makes it hard to eat, choose soft foods like cooked vegetables, soup, yogurt, oatmeal, ripe fruit or scrambled eggs.

5. Add healthy calories

If you're not allergic to nuts, try mixing nut butter into oatmeal, adding olive oil to vegetables, toasted bread with avocado or blending fruit into yogurt to make a simple smoothie or shake.

6. Keep meals simple and convenient

Healthy eating doesn't have to be complicated. Stock your kitchen with simple foods like rotisserie chicken, frozen vegetables, hard-boiled eggs, cut-up fruit, salad mixes or frozen meals with balanced ingredients.

7. Boost flavor

Taste can change as you get older. Add herbs, spices, lemon juice or low-sodium sauces to make your meals tastier. A little extra flavor can encourage you to eat more.

8. Stay hydrated

Dehydration can make you feel tired or confused. Drink water throughout the day, but avoid drinking too much right before a meal. Tea, milk, broth and fruit with high water content (like oranges and watermelon) also count as liquids.

9. Try finger foods or shakes

Foods that are easier to eat can help if you have coordination problems or tremors.

10. Make meals social

Eating with others can make meals more enjoyable. Invite a friend, join a community meal program or visit a local senior center. Social time can help improve your mood and increase your appetite.

How caregivers can help

If you are caring for an older adult, you can also help support good nutrition. It may help to:

- Watch for changes in eating habits
- Help with grocery shopping or meal prep
- Sit down for shared meals
- Encourage light activity, like short walks
- Talk with a primary care provider (PCP) about supplements or additional support



Need extra support?

Good nutrition is more than food; it's fuel for everyday life. If you have concerns about appetite, weight changes or getting enough nutrients, schedule an appointment with a Banner Health provider at 833-252-5535 or [bannerhealth.com/getcarenow](https://www.bannerhealth.com/getcarenow).

Thriving with Diabetes

By Regan Olsson

How diabetes management changes with age



Managing diabetes can change as you get older. What worked when you were in your 40s and 50s might not be the best approach in later years.

Your body's metabolism might slow down. You may lose muscle or become less active. You might also be managing more than one health problem at the same time.

Medications might work differently for you. Some medicines could stay in your body longer and have a stronger effect.

All these things can change how your body responds to diabetes treatment. That's why your care plan may need to be adjusted over time. The goal is not to be stricter, but to manage your diabetes in a way that is safer and better fits your life.

"Your provider will consider your medical conditions, physical abilities, memory and social situation," said April Ehrlich, MD, a geriatric medicine specialist with Banner – University Medicine. "Over time, they may focus more on preventing low blood sugars, minimizing medication side effects and maximizing what matters most to you."

With your provider's help, here are easy steps you can follow to take care of diabetes safely as you get older.

1. Monitor your blood sugar levels

As you get older, it's more important to watch your blood sugar. Aging can change how your body uses glucose, which can make sugar levels harder to predict.

Regular monitoring helps prevent high blood sugar, which can damage your heart, kidneys, eyes and nerves. It also helps avoid low blood sugar, which can cause dizziness, confusion or falls.

Talk to your primary care provider (PCP) about your management plan and blood sugar goals. You can use tools like blood sugar logs or apps to track trends. Talk to your PCP about adjusting your medication if you notice any changes in your levels based on meals, activity, medication or any other reason.

2. Revisit your medications

Regular medication reviews with your PCP help ensure you're taking the safest dose — and only what you need.

Here are some steps you can take:

- Take the exact dosage at the times your provider recommends.
- Talk to your PCP if you notice dizziness, confusion or any other side effects.
- Monitor your medications and dispose of expired ones properly.
- Maintain a list of all prescriptions and over-the-counter medications, as well as supplements, so your provider can review it with you.

3. Make nutrition changes that work for you

You don't need a perfect diet to manage diabetes. Small, steady choices can support blood sugar control, strength and energy.

Focus on:

- High-fiber foods like whole grains, fruits and vegetables
- Lower-sodium options, using herbs and spices for flavor
- Enough protein to help protect muscle mass
- Balanced meals with vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains
- Smaller meals eaten more often to prevent blood sugar swings

4. Stay active in ways that feel safe

Regular exercise helps control blood sugar and lowers your risk of complications.

"Staying active can help you maintain your muscle mass, support your bone health, preserve your physical independence and help prevent falls," Dr. Ehrlich said.

Good options include walking, swimming, water aerobics, light resistance exercises and chair yoga. Talk to your PCP before starting a new activity.

5. Support your emotional well-being

Managing diabetes can feel overwhelming at times. Stress and emotional strain can affect blood sugar and overall health.

"If you're struggling, let your provider know," Dr. Ehrlich said. "There may be ways to simplify your management plan."

Prioritize sleep, stay socially connected, manage stress and focus on small, achievable goals.

6. Take steps to prevent complications

Regular care helps lower the risk of diabetes-related problems. Be sure to:

- See your PCP regularly
- Get routine eye exams
- Check your feet daily
- Manage blood pressure and cholesterol
- Stay hydrated, especially in warm weather
- Moisturize skin to keep it from getting dry and cracking

Managing diabetes may bring new challenges as you age, but you can thrive with planning and support. For care designed just for you, speak with a Banner Health provider. Schedule an appointment at [bannerhealth.com/getcarenow](https://www.bannerhealth.com/getcarenow).





Is your heart keeping up with you?

Signs your heart valves may need attention

By Regan Olsson

You know your body better than anyone. You know what “normal tired” feels like after a long day, and when something feels different.

Maybe you’ve noticed that everyday tasks take more out of you than they used to. A short walk leaves you breathless. You feel worn down sooner, even when you haven’t done much.

It’s easy to brush this off as part of getting older. But sometimes, these changes are your heart’s way of asking for attention.

Heart valve disease is often missed because its symptoms look a lot like aging. That delay can be dangerous.

“Quite often, the symptoms are confused with aging, which is highly unfortunate because symptoms indicate a life-threatening disease is present,” said Paul Sorajja, MD, an interventional cardiologist with Banner – University Medicine. “This overlap is why it’s so important not to dismiss new or worsening symptoms.”

What are heart valves, and what goes wrong?

Your heart has four valves that act like doors. They open and close with each heartbeat to keep blood moving in the right direction. When a valve doesn’t work properly, your heart has to work harder.

Valve problems usually fall into two types:

- Stenosis (narrowing): The valve becomes stiff and doesn’t fully open.
- Regurgitation (leakage): The valve doesn’t close tightly, allowing blood to flow backward.

“As a result, blood pressure builds up in the heart and lungs, leading to heart failure symptoms and life-threatening situations,” Dr. Sorajja said.

The most common cause is simple wear and tear over time. Other causes can include calcium buildup, infections, past radiation treatment to the chest or heart problems present at birth.

Symptoms of heart valve disease

It’s common to feel some stiffness, mild fatigue or slower movement with age. These changes usually don’t stop you from doing everyday activities.

Heart valve disease is different. Signs to watch for include:

- Shortness of breath, especially during activity
- Chest pain or pressure
- Extreme fatigue with light activity
- Swelling in your ankles or feet
- Dizziness or fainting

If walking the dog, carrying groceries or climbing a few steps suddenly feels much harder than before, that’s a reason to talk to your primary care provider (PCP).

Keep a journal of your symptoms. Write down when symptoms happen, what you were doing and how long they lasted. This gives your PCP valuable clues.

How are heart valve problems diagnosed?

Your provider may start by listening for a murmur, an unusual sound that can signal valve trouble. Other tests may include:

- Echocardiogram
- Stress test
- CT scan or MRI

“These initial tests are non-invasive and help with diagnosis,” Dr. Sorajja said. “When these tests are inconclusive, a heart catheterization may be done to study the valves further.”

While the name sounds scary, most people are awake and comfortable during this procedure, and recovery is usually quick.

If it is a valve problem, what happens next?

Not all valve problems need immediate treatment. Some are safely watched over time. Others may be treated with medication to ease symptoms.

When repair or replacement is needed, today’s options are safer than ever. One major advance is TAVR (transcatheter aortic valve replacement), which replaces a valve using a thin tube instead of open-heart surgery.

“The valve replacement is successful in more than 98% of cases with procedural risk of only 1% to 2%,” Dr. Sorajja said. “Many of these treatments require only a short hospital stay and lead to many years of improvement in symptoms.”

Schedule an appointment

Feeling older doesn’t always mean it’s just aging. If something feels off, trust your instincts and talk with your PCP or a Banner Health specialist. Book an appointment today at bannerhealth.com/getcarenow.



When is it time to stop cancer screenings?

How to make the right choice for your health

By Regan Olsson

Cancer screenings can find disease early, often before symptoms show. Finding it early can make cancer easier to treat.

But as you get older, the question becomes more complex: When should you stop cancer screenings?

A national poll shows that many adults are not sure. That makes sense because there is no single answer.

The best time depends on your overall health, how long you are likely to live and your risk for different cancers. When to stop screening is different for everyone.

Why screenings still matter

"The point of cancer screenings is to target people who are more prone to a certain type of cancer at their age," said David Paul, MD, an oncologist with Banner MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Screening tests have helped save countless lives. They include:

- Mammograms for breast cancer
- Colonoscopy or stool-based tests for colon cancer
- Low-dose CT scans for lung cancer (especially in long-term smokers)
- Pap tests for cervical cancer
- PSA blood tests for prostate cancer

When screenings may do more harm than good

It's natural to assume that more screening is always better. But after a point, more testing might not help much and could even cause problems.

Possible downsides include:

- False positives, which may lead to unnecessary follow-up tests or biopsies
- Complications from invasive procedures like colonoscopy
- Detecting slow-growing cancers that won't cause problems for the rest of your life
- Stress and emotional strain from treatments that aren't needed

Some national guidelines suggest stopping certain screenings around ages 75 to 80, but Dr. Paul said the decision is not always that simple.

"We need to be cautious not to cause harm as you get into the 75-plus age range but not discount that people could have another 15 to 20 years of life ahead of them that we want to protect," he said.

A more personalized approach

Age can be misleading. Some people in their 80s are strong, active and living full, independent lives. But others in their 60s or 70s may have serious health issues that limit the benefit of finding cancer early.

That's why screening shouldn't depend on your age alone. Dr. Paul uses a five-year rule of thumb. If there's nothing else threatening your health in the next five years, he generally recommends continuing screening. The goal is to help you make screening decisions that support your quality of life, not just follow a checklist.



Screening may still make sense if you:

- Are active, independent and in good health
- Have a long life expectancy
- Have a strong family history of cancer
- Are a long-term smoker
- Haven't kept up with past screenings
- Want to stay proactive with your doctor's guidance

Should I still get screened?

Each type of cancer screening is different, so talk to your primary care provider (PCP). Having open conversations with your PCP can help you make informed choices that align with your plans and goals.

"These should be transparent discussions about your risks and how to make the rest of your life as comfortable and as long as possible," Dr. Paul said.

At Banner MD Anderson, we support smart, evidence-based decisions about screening and prevention. If you have questions, schedule an appointment at bannerhealth.com/getcarenow. We can help you weigh the pros and cons and feel confident about your path forward.



Healthy Living Calendar

Podcast helps people living with dementia and their caregivers

Now in its fifth year, the Dementia Untangled podcast provides expert guidance and support for people living with dementia and their caregivers.

The award-winning series covers innovative ideas, helpful strategies and evidence-based approaches to make caregiving more manageable. Episodes explore topics ranging from caregiver tips to the latest research, clinical updates and advocacy efforts.

Learn more at bannerhealth.com/DementiaUntangled or listen on your favorite podcast platform.

BEACON Newsletter helps navigate Alzheimer's and dementia

The free BEACON e-newsletter offers valuable information for caregivers, people with early-stage Alzheimer's and dementia, clinical trial participants, health care professionals and community members.

Sign up to receive three email newsletters with practical advice and helpful tips to improve living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, updates on research opportunities and information about events hosted by Banner Health and community partners.

Subscribe at BannerHealth.com/Alzheimers.

GUIDE: Innovative Dementia Care Now Available to Arizona Patients

Caring for a loved one with dementia can be overwhelming. Banner Health's GUIDE program provides dementia-focused support for patients on Medicare Fee-for-Service, including those who also qualify for AHCCCS. GUIDE connects patients with a network of specialized providers and practitioners dedicated to delivering continuous, compassionate care.

Who can participate?

You may be eligible if you:

- Have a confirmed dementia diagnosis
- Have Medicare as your primary payor and are enrolled in Parts A and B
- Are not enrolled in Medicare hospice or PACE
- Live independently, outside of long-term nursing facilities

Benefits of GUIDE

- Monthly check-ins with a personal health coach: Receive guidance and practical strategies to manage dementia-related challenges
- Comprehensive home assessment: Identify safety concerns and adjust to improve daily life
- Respite care for caregivers: Up to \$2,563 annually, a benefit rarely covered by Medicare outside hospice care

GUIDE is designed to support both patients and caregivers, providing tools and resources to maintain quality of life, reduce stress and create manageable routines. The program emphasizes a personalized, hands-on approach, ensuring patients living with dementia receive care that meets their unique needs.

For more information or to see if you qualify, reach out to Banner Health's friendly team at dementiacarepartners@bannerhealth.com.

With GUIDE, families don't have to navigate dementia alone — compassionate, expert support is available every step of the way.