

Health

MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center

Preventing breast cancer: One woman's brave journey.



Inside: What you need to know about Crohn's disease. | New cancer therapies offer new hope. | Cardiac CT: A powerful tool for diagnosis. | Struggling with back pain? Here's how to decide if surgery makes sense.

Letter from the president.

Dear neighbors,

“Partners in health” is a great way to describe how our dedicated providers work hand in hand with patients facing life-changing diagnoses such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, and Crohn’s disease. In this issue of Health, you will see how our specialists are not only treating complex conditions but are also delivering personal care and hope for a better future to people throughout our region.

This work also extends to the prevention of disease. We are committed to helping individuals reduce their risk for conditions such as cardiovascular disease and breast cancer by offering the most advanced surgical procedures, screenings, and technologies. From spotlighting women’s health issues like perimenopause and menopause to supporting patients like Tamara Brown, from this month’s cover story, through the challenges of a genetic mutation that increased her cancer risk, our team remains focused on improving quality of life at every stage. The exceptional care that takes place within our hospital walls doesn’t end when a patient goes home. It continues through our commitment

to meeting people where they are. Whether at health education programs or community outreach events, we are extending care beyond our doors. You will read about how, in recent months, several members of our clinical team shared important health information sessions with the community, and I was grateful for the chance to engage directly with residents at the District 5 Coffee Club in October.

I am grateful for the partnership and collaboration between our hospital and you, the community we work diligently to serve and care for. Together, we are not only treating illness, we are building a healthier future.

In good health,



Stephen T. Michaels, MD, FACHE
President, MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center
Senior Vice President, MedStar Health



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President, MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center



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Coffee talk: Our hospital president connects with local residents.

Stephen T. Michaels, MD, president of MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, joined local residents at the District 5 Coffee Club on October 1, 2025, for a conversation and a meet and greet.

Dr. Michaels discussed the importance of having a leading hospital “right in your backyard,” sharing updates on future expansion plans and the range of high-quality services available at MedStar Southern Maryland to meet the health needs of patients throughout the region.

“It was a great opportunity to engage and talk openly with members of our community and to connect with people where they are,” said Dr. Michaels.



Dr. Michaels engaging with community members.



Our hospital recognized as high performing

We were once again recognized by U.S. News & World Report as a high-performing hospital in 2025-2026, highlighting excellence and high-quality clinical care in five specialties. Find out which specialties made the rankings on page 10.



Awards for excellence in cardiac and stroke care

Several recognitions recently received from the American Heart Association demonstrate our commitment to delivering the highest level of cardiac and stroke care to patients throughout Southern Maryland. Learn more about the significance of these awards on page 11.



Commitment to community health

Members of our clinical team joined area residents for health education presentations during fall outreach events designed to provide lifesaving health information. Read more about the discussions on page 19.

Did you know? One blood donation helps three patients.

Blood drives are important to MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center and the community as they assist in meeting the need during the national blood shortage. Blood drives are held at the hospital once a month in the multipurpose room.

Become a blood donor today! Visit [RedCrossBlood.org](https://www.RedCrossBlood.org) to find an upcoming blood drive at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital.

One woman's brave journey to prevent breast cancer before it started.

The most difficult decisions of Tamara Brown's life came not after a cancer diagnosis, but before one.



Tamara Brown (center) pictured with her surgery team, Patricia Wehner, MD (left) and Samer Jabbour, MD (right).

Mammogram screenings are your first line of defense against breast cancer. If you're at average risk and age 40 or older, call **301-877-5588** to schedule your annual mammogram today. Take our breast health risk assessment at [MedStarHealth.org/BreastHRA](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/BreastHRA) if you're not sure of your risk.

Tamara Brown's mother died of breast cancer when Tamara was just 15. In 2001, she lost her sister to the disease at a very young age. These devastating losses shaped the way Tamara approached her own health. She was diligent about getting her annual mammograms starting in her 30s, but in 2018, at the age of 46, a small shadow appeared on her scan. While not alarming, it required close monitoring. A year later, more suspicious areas had developed. Fortunately, a breast biopsy was negative for cancer, and Tamara was referred for genetic testing. The result revealed what she had feared most—she carried the BRCA2 gene mutation, which drastically increases lifetime risk of developing breast cancer.

This news shook Tamara to the core. "I lost my mom and my sister to breast cancer at very young ages. I knew I couldn't ignore this," she said.

Part one of the journey: weighing her options

For individuals who carry a BRCA gene mutation, a preventative bilateral mastectomy (removal of both breasts and surrounding breast tissue) can significantly lower the risk of developing breast cancer. A bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy (removal of the fallopian tubes and ovaries) may also be recommended to reduce the risk of ovarian cancer, which can also be linked to BRCA mutations.

Shocked, Tamara realized she had to face this decision head-on.

The road to prevention

In 2021, Tamara underwent a total hysterectomy (surgical removal of the uterus and cervix) and removal

of her ovaries and fallopian tubes. The next difficult choice was the double mastectomy. "If I developed breast cancer, no one knew how severe or aggressive it would be, given my family history and a positive BRCA2 gene test. That scared me," she recalled. "I cried a lot of tears, wondering if I was ready for this."

Tamara found reassurance in **Patricia Wehner, MD**, a breast surgeon at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, who explained Tamara's options.

"Patients with a BRCA mutation can face a lifetime risk of developing breast cancer between 45% to 80%," says Dr. Wehner. "For patients with a strong family history and a known genetic mutation, a bilateral preventative mastectomy can help reduce their overall cancer risk to less than 15%. We also recommend bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy to reduce the risk of ovarian cancer. For someone like Tamara, it was a way to bring her risk down as much as possible."

Dr. Wehner acknowledges that the choice is never simple. "For women without a cancer diagnosis, the decision is very personal," she adds. The other option, high-risk surveillance (watching and waiting), will not reduce the risk of developing breast cancer—it only helps doctors find it sooner if it occurs. "Surgery will definitively decrease a woman's lifetime risk," says Dr. Wehner.

Part two of Tamara's journey

In 2022, after months of deliberation, Tamara chose to move forward with the double mastectomy with Dr. Wehner and

Samer Jabbour, MD, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon at MedStar Southern Maryland, guiding her through the process.

With today's advanced surgical techniques, many patients who undergo mastectomy and breast reconstruction can achieve results that look and feel natural. This includes preserving a patient's nipples and areola, which was another concern Tamara had about undergoing the procedure.

Dr. Wehner explains, "We will always attempt to preserve the patient's nipples whenever possible. Dr. Jabbour and I are always pushing the limits of what can be salvaged. If the nipple is not involved with cancer and the blood supply is strong enough, then it is safe to save."

For Tamara, this made all the difference.

Living without fear

Three years later, Tamara remains breast cancer-free and continues to see Dr. Wehner annually for follow-up exams.

Tamara shares her story to encourage others facing similar decisions. "Be informed. Find a doctor who listens to you. Get your yearly mammograms done and genetic testing if you have a family history of breast cancer, like I did. Talk to your family about the risks.

"I couldn't have asked for a better team. I love them so much," she adds. "They helped me with a decision that saved my life."



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/PatriciaWehnerMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/PatriciaWehnerMD) to learn more about Dr. Wehner or call **301-877-5607** to schedule an appointment.



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/SamerJabbourMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/SamerJabbourMD) to learn more about Dr. Jabbour or call **301-877-5607** to schedule an appointment.

Changing lives with advanced multiple sclerosis care in Southern Maryland.

New therapies and specialized care are transforming the outlook for patients living with MS.

Just 20 years ago, people living with multiple sclerosis (MS) had very few treatment options. Yet, over the past decade, an explosion of new therapies has given many more patients hope for living a fuller, higher-quality life with the autoimmune disease.

“When the first therapies came out in the 1990s and early 2000s, there were only a handful. Today, we have nearly 30 highly effective therapies available, with even more on the horizon,” says **Jemima Akinsanya, DO**, a neurologist, MS specialist, and director of our comprehensive MS care center. Our MS care center was designated by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s Partners in MS Care program in 2024 and is the only one of its kind in Prince George’s County.

This remarkable progress means patients now have more options for targeted therapies and greater hope for a better future with the disease.

Understanding multiple sclerosis

MS is an autoimmune disease where the body’s immune system mistakenly attacks the protective covering around nerve fibers in the brain and spinal cord called the myelin sheath. This can cause symptoms that range from muscle weakness and numbness to vision changes and memory issues.

While there is still no cure for MS, treatments have come a long way, significantly reducing symptoms and delaying progression of the disease and allowing patients to continue living full and active lives.

Dr. Akinsanya explains that untreated MS behaves like a raging fire, with active inflammation burning through the nervous system. Modern therapies act like powerful water hoses, dousing the flames and stopping most of the immediate damage. “Even when the flames are out, there can still be embers, representing the slower, smoldering changes of progressive disease,” she says. “Treatment aims to quench the fire and slow the embers so that damage happens much more slowly, preserving function and reducing relapses.”

Importance of early intervention

New MS treatments target immune cells called lymphocytes, preventing them from attacking nerves in the central nervous system associated with functions such as muscle control and movement. Medications may be given as twice-yearly infusions, monthly self-injections, or daily pills. At MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, these infusions are available in the on-site infusion center.

The type of therapy depends upon a patient’s preference as well as disease progression. Each person is unique, and clinicians consider how active the disease is, where lesions are found in the body, and a person’s lifestyle goals. These advanced medications can help prevent new MS lesions from



forming, suppressing disability and relapses of debilitating symptoms. That’s why early intervention and treatment by an MS specialist is so important.

“The sooner someone starts treatment after their first symptoms, the better the long-term outcome,” emphasizes Dr. Akinsanya. “If there is a concern about MS, I always encourage patients to see a neurologist and an MS specialist because we are on top of the latest science, new therapies, and clinical trials. That expertise helps preserve long-term quality of life for patients.”

Clinical trials and emerging therapies

We provide patients in the community with access to clinical trials, including several MS therapies. Researchers are studying medications already

approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to better understand their long-term impact, while other trials are testing new drugs and a potential vaccine targeting Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), a common virus strongly linked with MS, to see whether targeting EBV could slow the disease or reduce future relapses. Involvement with clinical research at the community hospital level provides more individuals with cutting-edge therapies before they are widely available. Patients at our MS care center can discuss with their provider whether they are a candidate for participating in a research study.

Living a full life with MS

For individuals with the condition, access to this kind of comprehensive care and advanced therapies close to home is changing lives for the better.

Could it be multiple sclerosis?

Signs of multiple sclerosis (MS) differ for each individual. For some, early symptoms may be subtle, while others may experience more pronounced effects of the chronic autoimmune disorder.

Common symptoms of MS include:

- Tingling, numbness, or weakness in your limbs
- Loss of balance or coordination
- Dizziness
- Stiffness or muscle spasms
- Loss of vision or blurry vision
- Slurred speech
- Memory or cognitive issues

Early symptoms of MS can be associated with other medical conditions, so it is important to seek care from an experienced neurologist or MS specialist for an accurate diagnosis.

“MS does not have to define a person’s life anymore,” says Dr. Akinsanya. “With early treatment and the right care team, people can live a very full life, working, raising families, and pursuing the things they love. That is the hope we can offer today.”



To learn more about MS, visit [MedStarHealth.org/M-S](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/M-S).

To learn more about Dr. Akinsanya and schedule an appointment, visit [MedStarHealth.org/JemimaAkinsanyaDO](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/JemimaAkinsanyaDO) or call **301-877-4540**.

Crohn's disease: what you need to know.

Advanced care and ongoing support are helping patients manage symptoms and live fuller, more comfortable lives.



People with Crohn's disease often first notice something is not quite right when they experience unexplained digestive symptoms. Gastroenterologist **Robert Schenck, MD**, notes, "The most common complaints that bring patients in to be evaluated include abdominal pain, diarrhea, and blood in the stool."

Crohn's disease is a chronic inflammatory condition that targets the lining of the digestive tract, most often in the small intestine and colon. According to the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation, the condition is most often diagnosed in adolescents and individuals between the ages of 20 and 30. The gold standard for diagnosing the disease is a colonoscopy with biopsy of the intestinal lining.

But the cause of the disease is not completely understood. "The development of Crohn's disease is

thought to involve environmental factors and some level of genetic predisposition. New data suggests it may be linked to a diet high in processed foods, but an exact cause is still unknown," explains Dr. Schenck. He adds that while family history of the disease and smoking can increase a person's risk of developing Crohn's disease, not everyone with these factors will go on to develop it.

Treatment and the journey to remission

"While there is no cure for Crohn's disease, the treatments available are highly effective," says Dr. Schenck. "Most patients can experience full remission, where their colon looks normal and they no longer have troublesome symptoms."

Treatment involves infusion and/or injection of highly targeted medications that help calm the immune system's attack on the gut.

At MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, these infusions are available in the on-site infusion center. After several infusions, many patients transition to self-administered injections at home, with treatment intervals ranging from two to eight weeks, depending on the individual. Newer therapies are designed to be more gut-selective, meaning fewer side effects and a better experience for patients. Oral medications are currently in development for future treatment and can be available for select patients.

Dr. Schenck reminds patients that treatment is lifelong, as there is no cure for the disease, but remission is a reality most people experience. "Once Crohn's disease is in remission, patients can usually expect both relief from symptoms and an improved quality of life."

Colostomy: What is it and what can patients expect?

Expert surgical care and specialized support help patients recover safely and regain confidence after colostomy.

A colostomy is a surgical procedure that creates a small opening in the abdominal wall, called a stoma, through which the colon is routed. This allows waste (stool) to leave the body through a special bag instead of the rectum. Colostomies are usually needed during surgery on the large intestine to help protect the body from infection and sepsis. Sepsis is a life-threatening condition that can occur when an infection spreads through the body, causing extreme inflammation. Left untreated, sepsis can be deadly.



Tushar Samdani, MD, a colon and rectal surgeon at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, explains that a colostomy may be necessary after surgery for

colon or rectal cancer, if the colon is blocked or has a hole. "The goal is to prevent sepsis and give the body time to recover," he says.

Whether a colostomy is temporary or permanent depends on the underlying condition. "If a colostomy is performed in an emergency, it is usually temporary," notes Dr. Samdani, adding that once the patient heals, the colostomy can be reversed and the stoma removed during another surgical procedure, allowing stool to pass naturally

through the large intestines once again. A colostomy may become permanent if a patient's cancer is in the lower rectum or anus, if a person has lifelong loss of bowel control, or if an individual is too sick to undergo another surgery to have it reversed or closed.

Living with a colostomy

Getting used to life with a colostomy can take time, but most people live full and active lives. After surgery, patients work with our wound care nurses who specialize in stoma care and teach them how to empty the bag, care for the skin around the stoma to avoid infection and make any necessary dietary changes. Colostomy bags are emptied daily and are typically changed every few days, which is also part of a patient's education.

Body image can be a common concern with colostomy, but Dr. Samdani reassures his patients. "I have individuals in my clinic who have had a stoma for years, and you would never know it. Over time, as patients become more comfortable with their new routine, their confidence grows, helping to reduce feelings of stigma."

Ultimately, a colostomy is about quality of life and survival. Dr. Samdani stresses, "Think of a colostomy as a health plan or a temporary bridge to protect your health during a serious health challenge. A colostomy can save your life."



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Crohns](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Crohns) to learn more about Crohn's disease.

To learn more about Dr. Schenck and schedule an appointment, visit [MedStarHealth.org/RobertSchenckMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/RobertSchenckMD) or call **301-877-4599**.

Visit [MedStarHealth.org/StomaCare](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/StomaCare) to learn more about colostomy and stoma care.

To learn more about Dr. Samdani, visit [MedStarHealth.org/TusharSamdaniMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/TusharSamdaniMD) or call **301-705-7870** to schedule an appointment.

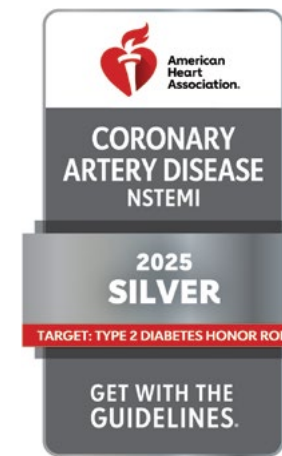
U.S. News & World Report recognizes our hospital as high performing.

MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center has been recognized as a high-performing hospital in the newly released 2025–2026 U.S. News & World Report Best Hospitals rankings. This recognition highlights our hospital's continued commitment to providing high-quality specialty services and patient care in the following areas:

- Cancer care (leukemia, lymphoma, and myeloma)
- Heart attack
- Heart failure
- Kidney failure
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

According to U.S. News & World Report, hospitals performing in the top 10 percent in a specialty or condition receive the high performing designation.

At MedStar Southern Maryland we have a history of high performance in several areas, and our commitment to delivering excellent care throughout the Prince George's County and Southern Maryland regions remains a top priority. Thank you to all our associates and providers for your continued commitment to delivering safe, high-quality care to our community.



American Heart Association recognizes our hospital for excellence in stroke and cardiac care.

Our team at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center recently received multiple recognitions from the American Heart Association for delivering lifesaving heart and stroke care that meets the highest national standards.

- Get with the Guidelines® – Stroke Gold Plus with Target: Type 2 Diabetes Honor Roll achievement award for ensuring stroke patients, including those with type 2 diabetes, receive the most appropriate treatment according to nationally recognized, research-based guidelines, ultimately leading to more lives saved and reduced disability.
- Get with the Guidelines® – Coronary Artery Disease NSTEMI Silver with Target: Type 2 Diabetes Honor Roll award for our commitment to providing rapid, research-based care to patients experiencing a type of heart attack known as a non-ST elevation myocardial infarction (NSTEMI), including evidence-based management for patients with type 2 diabetes.

- Get with the Guidelines® – Coronary Artery Disease STEMI Receiving Bronze award for the hospital's commitment to providing rapid, research-based care to people experiencing an ST elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI), a type of heart attack known to be more severe and dangerous than other types.

MedStar Southern Maryland is also a state-designated Cardiac Intervention Center and Primary Stroke Center by the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems (MIEMSS), meaning our teams are ready 24/7 to provide immediate, lifesaving care for patients experiencing a heart attack or stroke.

"Access to the highest level of stroke and cardiac care is critical for patients throughout Prince George's County. These awards demonstrate our dedication to adhering to the latest treatment guidelines for the best outcomes for our patients," says **Stephen Michaels, MD**, president, MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center.

Philanthropy in action: Building a healthier community together.

We're proud to lead the way in advanced, patient-centered care, combining the latest technology with the expertise of the region's top specialists. From heart and vascular services to neurosciences and oncology, we're committed to helping every Southern Maryland resident live their healthiest life.

This progress is made possible by our generous donors. Philanthropic support fuels new treatments, expands access to care, and strengthens community programs, such as our annual Baby Shower and Resource Fair, which connect hundreds of families to vital health resources.

Together, we're reimagining health care and ensuring every patient receives the high-quality, compassionate care they deserve. Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Philanthropy](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Philanthropy) to learn more about ways to donate.

MedStar Health has been a national leader in research, diagnosis, and treatment of cardiovascular disease for more than 60 years. Visit [MedStarHealth.org](https://www.MedStarHealth.org) to learn more about our stroke and cardiology care.



Five facts about perimenopause and menopause all women should know.

Hot flashes. Hormone fluctuations. Menstrual cycle changes.

With so much information about perimenopause and menopause online, it can be overwhelming. Obstetrician and gynecologist (Ob/Gyn) **Nekia Barrow, MD**, sets the facts straight about what women can expect during this time of change.



Fact 1: Perimenopause and menopause take place over several years.

Menopause marks the natural end of a woman's menstrual cycle. In the U.S., the average age is about 51 and a half, but most women enter perimenopause—the transitional years leading up to menopause—in their 40s and early 50s. Symptoms can last anywhere from five to seven years, or even longer.



Fact 2: Hot flashes are just one of many symptoms.

Hot flashes may be the most recognized sign of perimenopause, but they are far from the only symptom.

“During perimenopause, women often notice their bodies changing in different and unfamiliar ways,” notes Dr. Barrow. Common symptoms include:

- **Irregular cycles.** Periods may come closer together, farther apart, or not at all.
- **Hot flashes and night sweats.** These are caused by changing hormone levels.
- **Vaginal changes.** Lower estrogen (a female hormone) can cause

dryness or discomfort and even pain during intercourse due to the thinning of the vaginal tissue.

- **Brain fog.** Trouble concentrating, memory lapses, and losing your train of thought become more common.
- **Sleep problems.** Difficulty falling or staying asleep and insomnia are often reported.
- **Mood shifts.** Increased irritability, anxiety, or depression can accompany hormone fluctuations.
- **Physical changes.** Weight gain, thinning hair, skin changes, and body aches and pains can occur with declining estrogen.

Symptoms vary, with some women experiencing only mild changes while others find the transition more disruptive.



Fact 3: Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is safe and effective.

HRT remains the most effective treatment for perimenopause and menopause symptoms approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA).

“When under the guidance of a healthcare professional, HRT is a safe way to reduce troublesome symptoms for most women,” Dr. Barrow says.

HRT is highly personalized, with doctors weighing the risks and benefits based on a patient's health and medical history. Combined therapy with estrogen and progesterone (two essential female hormones that regulate the reproductive system and naturally decline during perimenopause and menopause) is recommended for many women who still have a uterus. HRT can be given as a pill, skin patch, gel, or spray, with treatment typically lasting two to three years, or until symptoms and quality of life improve.



Fact 4: Pregnancy is still possible during perimenopause.

Irregular menstrual cycles do not mean a woman is no longer fertile.

“Women in perimenopause who still menstruate and ovulate, even if irregularly, have a chance of pregnancy,” cautions Dr. Barrow.



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Menopause](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Menopause) to learn more.



To learn more about Dr. Barrow, visit [MedStarHealth.org/NekiaBarrowMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/NekiaBarrowMD) or call **301-877-7200** to schedule an appointment.

Pregnancy becomes unlikely only after 12 consecutive months without a period—officially marking menopause.



Fact 5: Maintaining a healthy weight may be harder.

Hormonal changes can make it more challenging to maintain or lose weight, even with healthy habits. As estrogen declines, muscle and bone strength can decrease, while fat, especially around the belly, tends to increase.

“Building muscle mass through strength training is key,” advises Dr. Barrow. “It not only helps with

weight management but also protects the bones as estrogen decreases.” In addition, regular physical activity and a heart-healthy diet can lower the risk of cardiovascular disease and support overall bone health.

The bottom line
Perimenopause and menopause are natural life changes, but women do not need to suffer in silence.

“I encourage women to pay attention to their bodies,” says Dr. Barrow. “If you are experiencing disruptive symptoms, talk to your healthcare provider. There are options that can greatly improve your quality of life. You don't have to go through these changes alone.”



Provider Spotlight

Neggin Mokhtari, MD, recently named chair of obstetrics and gynecology (Ob/Gyn) at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, oversees the inpatient and outpatient Ob/Gyn department, leading growth and focusing on evidence-based, patient-centered care for women and babies throughout Southern Maryland.

A board-certified maternal-fetal medicine (MFM) specialist, Dr. Mokhtari received her medical degree from the University of Maryland School of Medicine and completed a four-year Ob/Gyn residency at Magee-Womens Hospital of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. She completed a three-year maternal-fetal medicine fellowship at MedStar Washington Hospital Center and MedStar Georgetown University Hospital.

“My grandfather was an Ob/Gyn in Iran and immigrated here to raise me,” she says. “His influence was a key factor in why I became a doctor and fell in love with Ob/Gyn in medical school. His picture sits on my desk as a reminder of the ways he helped so many women and how I can do the same.”

Dr. Mokhtari see patients at MedStar Health Medical Center at Brandywine.

To learn more about Dr. Mokhtari visit, [MedStarHealth.org/NegginMokhtariMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/NegginMokhtariMD) or call **301-782-2220** to schedule an appointment.

New therapies offer cancer patients hope and fewer side effects.

Today's breakthrough cancer therapies not only are offering hope for the future and an improved quality of life but are changing the treatment experience for many patients.



According to **Omar Taha, MD**, a medical oncologist and hematologist with our MedStar Georgetown Cancer Institute team at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center, "Cancer therapy has undergone a revolutionary transformation over the years. In the past, treatment often meant surgery, chemotherapy, and possible radiation. These approaches remain important, but the last decade has brought remarkable progress with new options, including immunotherapy and targeted therapy."

In many cases, these new therapies are allowing patients to live longer with fewer serious side effects.

What are these new therapies?

Traditional chemotherapy is designed to kill fast-dividing cells. Since cancer cells multiply quickly,

chemotherapy can be an effective treatment. However, it may also affect healthy fast-growing cells in bone marrow, hair, and the digestive tract, which can lead to side effects such as fatigue, nausea, and hair loss.

Immunotherapy and targeted therapy work differently.

- Immunotherapy uses the body's own defense system. "It helps the body's immune system recognize and attack cancer cells, which often disguise themselves to hide from this attack," explains Dr. Taha. This approach has been remarkably successful in cancers such as melanoma, lymphoma, and lung and gastrointestinal cancers.
- Targeted therapies are "medications designed to zero in on a specific abnormality in a cancer cell, such as a genetic mutation or protein driving its growth," Dr. Taha says. By focusing only on diseased cells, targeted therapy spares most healthy ones, often leading to fewer side effects and positive outcomes.

At MedStar Southern Maryland, these therapies are making a difference for patients with lung, colon, and stomach cancers, as well as melanoma. While not every

patient is a candidate for these therapies, physicians test every tumor for specific genetic markers to ensure each patient receives the most effective treatment for their type of cancer.

Benefits and side effects

"Patients receiving these therapies often find them easier to tolerate than chemotherapy," Dr. Taha states. Immunotherapy is given intravenously in the hospital's dedicated infusion therapy center every three to six weeks. While treatment can sometimes cause inflammation, patients are monitored closely and treated for side effects if they occur. Similarly, targeted therapies are usually taken as pills but still need monitoring as they may result in some side effects.

Care close to home

At our cancer center, patients benefit from advanced treatments delivered by a multidisciplinary team of experts. This collaborative model brings specialists together, including oncologists, surgeons, radiologists, pathologists, and more, to review each case from every angle. By combining their expertise, the team creates a unified, personalized treatment plan that ensures nothing is overlooked, reduces delays in care, and offers patients the best possible outcomes—all in one convenient location.

"Today, patients have access to more advanced therapies, right here at MedStar Southern Maryland," says Dr. Taha. "Being able to provide these breakthrough treatments close to home is what makes our cancer center so special."

The future of cancer treatment

Clinical trials have blazed a path forward for many of today's breakthrough cancer treatments. "We have arrived at this remarkable point in oncology because of brilliant researchers developing and testing new medications. We also have amazing patients who enroll in these clinical trials, who are not just benefiting from new therapies but also paving the way for others to receive them," says Dr. Taha. Over the past several years, a robust research infrastructure has been built at MedStar Southern Maryland, offering patients local access to clinical trials in oncology and other medical disciplines.



To learn more about Dr. Taha, visit [MedStarHealth.org/OmarTahaMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/OmarTahaMD) or call **301-877-HOPE (4673)** to schedule an appointment.

A personalized approach to cancer care

Dr. Taha emphasizes that patient-centered care is the driving force of our MedStar Georgetown Cancer Institute at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center. "At our

center, comprehensive care and treatment are focused not only on breakthrough drugs and new therapies but also on each patient's culture, values, and goals of care. It really is how we treat people," he concludes.



Provider Spotlight

Omar Taha, MD, joined our MedStar Georgetown Cancer Institute team at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center in August 2025 after training and practicing at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He brings a deep commitment to advancing cancer treatment in the Southern Maryland region with a focus on patient-centered care.

Dr. Taha's expertise includes the use of immunotherapy, targeted therapy, and traditional treatments across a wide range of cancers, ensuring patients receive coordinated care throughout their journey. His philosophy is to always put the patient at the center of every decision.

Dr. Taha is excited to help expand access to cutting-edge therapies right here in the community. "Patients no longer need to travel far for sophisticated care," he says. "We can provide comprehensive and life-changing therapies close to home."

Call **301-877-4673** to schedule an appointment at MedStar Georgetown Cancer Institute at MedStar Southern Maryland or visit [MedStarHealth.org/Cancer](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Cancer) to learn more.

Heart and soul

Helping you get to the heart of the matter.

Cardiac CT: A powerful tool for the diagnosis of coronary artery disease.

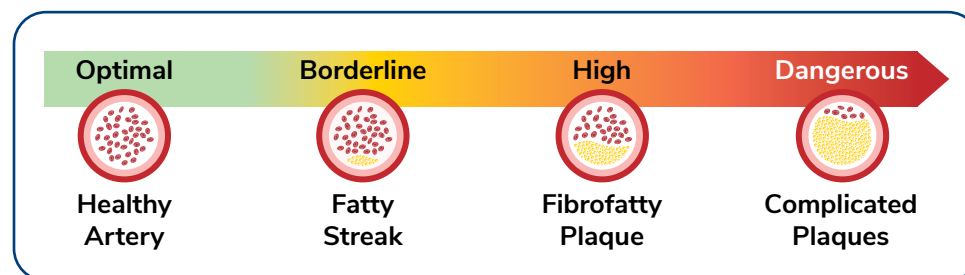
Understanding your heart health starts with the right tools, and cardiac CT is a powerful technology that can help detect coronary artery disease.

According to interventional cardiologist **Rimmy Farrakhan, MD**, the cardiac CT scan provides a clear view inside the vessels of the heart, helping clinicians make informed decisions about a patient's cardiac care while reducing the need for more invasive testing.

What is a cardiac CT?

A cardiac CT is a noninvasive imaging study that uses powerful X-ray technology combined with contrast dye to create high-resolution, 3D images of the coronary arteries. This advanced diagnostic tool allows physicians to visualize and measure plaque and calcium deposits (which can narrow arteries over time, restricting blood flow to the heart) in patients at increased risk for coronary artery disease.

"A cardiac CT can tell us how much plaque buildup is present in the coronary arteries and if that plaque is calcified or not. It allows interventional cardiologists to see any vulnerable areas or blockages that may cause a cardiac event like a heart attack down the road," explains Dr. Farrakhan.



Stages of plaque buildup within coronary arteries.

What is a coronary calcium score?

A coronary calcium score test is a related, non-contrast CT scan that measures calcified (hard) plaque in the coronary arteries. This test is for individuals with no cardiac symptoms and is used to assess a person's long-term risk of developing heart disease. Calcium scoring is typically recommended for individuals with a family history of heart attack, stroke, and/or coronary artery disease and for people with elevated cholesterol levels.

Dr. Farrakhan explains that a calcium score test falls into the category of preventative cardiology, often prompting discussions between a patient

and their cardiologist about starting or increasing therapies such as statin medications to lower cholesterol.

The calcium score helps guide treatment

"The lower the calcium score, the less likely a person is to have a heart attack or heart disease," Dr. Farrakhan adds. "Ideally, we look for a score of zero. As the score increases even into the single and double digits, it's time to have a discussion with your medical provider about adding medications to lower cholesterol and high blood pressure and implementing lifestyle changes."



Rimmy Farrakhan, MD, FACC

Provider Spotlight

MedStar Health is pleased to welcome interventional cardiologist **Rimmy Farrakhan, MD**. Fellowship-trained in interventional cardiology and cardiovascular medicine, Dr. Farrakhan cares for patients with coronary artery disease, angina, heart failure, and valvular heart disease.

She provides noninvasive diagnostic testing as well as minimally invasive interventional procedures, including coronary angiography and left and right heart catheterizations. In addition, Dr. Farrakhan specializes in the placement of mechanical circulatory support devices such as an intra-aortic balloon pump and Impella CP to assist the heart's pumping function, as well as stents for coronary artery blockages in the cardiac catheterization lab at MedStar Southern Maryland.

"Cardiology is an evolving field, and I am committed to remaining at the forefront of new developments to provide individualized and evidence-based care to my patients," she says. "This is an exciting time for cardiology, and we are incorporating the latest advancements into our practice to provide the best care for people in our community."

Who should receive a cardiac CT?

A cardiac CT scan is valuable for patients in the medium-risk category. This includes patients who:

- Are not having an active heart attack, but may be experiencing symptoms such as chest pain from a possible cardiac source
- Have had an unclear stress test result
- Have several risk factors for coronary artery disease, such as family history, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes

Benefits of a cardiac CT scan:

- A noninvasive diagnosis of coronary artery disease, meaning a physician can check for blockages without a surgical procedure
- A comprehensive functional assessment of the heart and

vessels, including previous bypass grafts and detailed information about plaque characteristics and severity

"One of the most important benefits of cardiac CT is the visual information it provides clinicians," explains Dr. Farrakhan. "This diagnostic tool helps guide decision-making, such as whether a patient's coronary artery disease can be managed through medications and close monitoring, or requires minimally invasive interventions like stenting."

Having access to this advanced cardiac technology at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center is another significant advantage for patients throughout the region. "We're bringing safer, faster, and more focused cardiac care to our community," adds Dr. Farrakhan.



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/CAD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/CAD) to learn more about coronary artery disease.

To learn more about Dr. Farrakhan, visit [MedStarHealth.org/RimmyFarrakhanMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/RimmyFarrakhanMD) or call **301-877-5677** to schedule an appointment.

Struggling with back pain? Here's how to decide if surgery makes sense.

Whether it's hours hunched over a computer, the natural wear and tear of aging, or that moment you lifted something the wrong way, back pain affects millions of Americans at some point in their lives.

David Weiner, MD, spine surgeon, explained that many causes of back pain can be effectively managed through conservative therapies. Sometimes, however, surgery is the best option.

Q: Is surgery always necessary to treat chronic back issues?

Dr. Weiner: No. Our first line of treatment is almost always going to be exercise, physical therapy, weight loss, and proper back hygiene. That includes learning safe lifting techniques and knowing your body's limits, especially as you age. Additional non-surgical options may include steroid injections or medications for arthritis, inflammation, and nerve irritation.

Q: What if conservative treatment isn't enough?

Dr. Weiner: If physical therapy, pain management, or other non-surgical options are no longer helping, or if certain conditions like significant spinal pressure or nerve irritation begin to affect mobility or quality of life, surgery may be worth

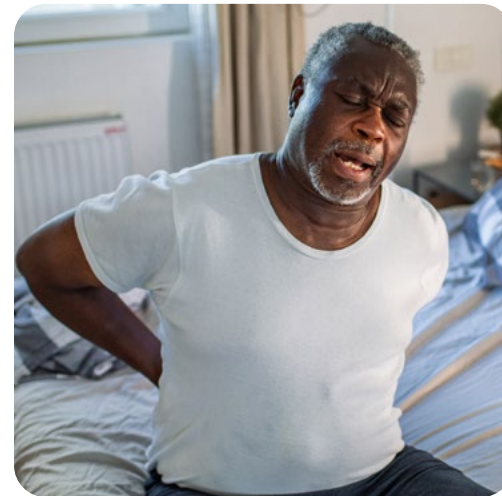
considering. In some cases, surgery helps protect muscle strength and maintain function. Acting sooner rather than later can support better outcomes.

Q: What conditions may require surgery?

Dr. Weiner: Conditions that commonly require surgical intervention include scoliosis (curvature of the spine), herniated discs, spondylolisthesis (spinal instability), arthritis-related bone degeneration, spinal stenosis (narrowing of spaces in the spine), spinal cysts, and tumors.

Q: I was told I need spine surgery. Should I be scared?

Dr. Weiner: Understandably, many patients feel anxious when surgery is recommended. In fact, feeling scared is a normal human reaction. I always tell my patients they are in the best of hands. Our spine surgery team at MedStar Southern Maryland Hospital Center is known throughout the region for its advanced capabilities in complex



and advanced spinal surgical techniques. Procedures performed with expertise and precision range from minimally invasive microdiscectomies, which remove disc fragments pressing on nerves, to more complex decompressions and spinal alignment surgeries for patients with instability or curvature. We only recommend surgery when it is medically necessary. Our patients often look back at the experience and say, "I should have done this sooner."

Bringing health education to our community.



Left to right, Raymond Butler, Co-Facilitator, Carolyn Lowe, Facilitator, Leslie A. Johnson, MSN, RN, CCRN, and Ziad Ghazzawi, MD.



Emily Carpenter, MSN-Ed, RN, cardiology nurse program coordinator.

As part of our ongoing commitment to community health, members of our clinical team provided Prince George's County residents with vital education on lifesaving topics during several outreach events this fall.

On September 17, internal medicine specialist Ziad Ghazzawi, MD, presented during Sepsis Awareness Month about this life-threatening medical condition caused by the body's extreme response to infection. Sepsis can rapidly cause severe damage to internal organs and even lead to death without immediate treatment. Dr. Ghazzawi stressed the importance of knowing

the risk factors, recognizing symptoms, urgently seeking medical treatment, and understanding how these steps can help save lives. Residents, many of whom had never heard of sepsis, asked questions, shared personal stories, and left the presentation better equipped to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Emily Carpenter, MSN-Ed, RN, cardiology nurse program coordinator, spoke in recognition of Sudden Cardiac Arrest Awareness Month in October. She discussed what sudden cardiac arrest is, how to recognize it, and how it differs

from a heart attack. The American Heart Association defines sudden cardiac arrest as when the heart suddenly and unexpectedly stops beating, usually due to an electrical problem, such as an irregular heartbeat. A heart attack occurs when a blocked artery prevents blood from flowing to the heart. The heart typically continues to beat, and symptoms can include chest pain and shortness of breath. "Educating the community to recognize sudden cardiac arrest will help those in need get the critical care that they need faster," Emily said.



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/NeckSpineCare](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/NeckSpineCare) to learn more about back pain and spine care.

To learn more about Dr. Weiner, visit [MedStarHealth.org/DavidWeinerMD](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/DavidWeinerMD) or call 301-856-1682 to schedule an appointment.

Looking to have our community health team attend your next event? Visit [MedStarHealth.org/MSMHCOutreach](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/MSMHCOutreach) and fill out our outreach request form.





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