

HEALTH FAQ

Using, strengthening the immune system to prevent cancer

DEAR DR. ROACH: I have read about using the immune system's response as a mechanism to battle cancer (such as brain and pancreatic) and to reduce the devastating impact that cancer and its treatment has on humans. I understand current drug trials show promising results. How do doctors and scientists use the immune system to treat cancer? — J.W.



Dr. Keith Roach
Contributing columnist

ANSWER: The concept of using the immune system to treat cancer is old, but the ability to do so has dramatically improved in the past few years. There are a few specific types of treatments that I'd like to highlight:

Immune checkpoint inhibitors are treatments that release inhibitions on the immune system. (These "strengthen" the immune system, which has beneficial but also potentially toxic effects.) For

melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer, these treatments have revolutionized treatment and led to dramatically improved outcomes in people whose melanoma has spread. Response rates are up to 60% in a disease where the prognosis used to be dismal.

The unleashed immune system can destroy cancer very effectively, but it also can attack healthy organs, with many people (between 10% to 60% depending on drugs and doses) developing damage to the skin, lungs, liver, thyroid, colon and heart. These toxicities range from mild to life-threatening.

The body's own immune cells can be genetically engineered to kill cancer cells. Chimeric antigen receptor T cells (CAR T cells) can be specifically changed to recognize cancer cells. This can lead to complete remission with some cancers, especially some leukemias and lymphomas. Unfortunately, they can also attack the body, leading to neurological damage that can be very serious.

Developing cancer vaccines is a highly promising strategy for personalizing the immune system to attack a person's own cancer. Although the United States has recently made dramatic cuts to its support of this research, researchers in other countries continue to study this. It can be used in combination with other traditional or immune-based treatments.

The immune system can be used to help treat cancer effectively, but there is still the potential for serious side effects.

DEAR DR. ROACH: I am 89 years old and doing reasonably well, but I have noticed some loss of energy and a bit of my balance. I try to walk, do some exercises, and then hit the hot tub every day to help relax my joints. I recall reading an article about a study, which concluded that 15 minutes in a hot tub equated, cardio-wise, to a 15-minute jog. I would really appreciate your opinion on this proposition. — J.D.

ANSWER: I read the study that I think you are referencing from Coventry, England, and the headline writers overstated the more cautious conclusions of the actual study. Being in a hot tub or sauna does increase the heart rate and the ability of the heart to exert itself when done daily for four weeks in people with heart failure.

Other studies have found that healthy volunteers also get small but significant improvements in their cardiac reserve, similar to (but not quite as much as) what would be expected with exercise.

The benefits of exercise are wellknown and large and go beyond the effects of the heart, while the benefits of regular hot-tub or sauna bathing appear to give some but not all the benefits of regular exercise. At age 89, there is a risk of heat-related injuries, including light-headedness and falling, so I would urge caution for new users not to use too high of a heat or stay in for too long, especially when first starting.

Dr. Roach regrets that he is unable to answer individual questions, but will incorporate them in the column whenever possible. Readers may email questions to ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu.

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UNC HEALTH Southeastern

UNCHSE to offer cash price lab testing

LUMBERTON — UNC Health Southeastern will launch a new lab service in Jan. 2026 which allows patients to order specific tests without a provider's order, and pay out of pocket, offering a convenient and flexible alternative to traditional lab services.

Benefits for patients include accessing health information more quickly without appointments, promoting engagement and convenience. By allowing self-ordering, patients gain more control over their wellness, fostering deeper engagement with healthcare providers. The service is particularly beneficial for uninsured patients or

those with high deductibles.

"As the first health system in the region to offer this model for lab services, this initiative underscores our commitment to innovative, patient-centered care and marks a significant step forward in health-care delivery," said UNC Health Southeastern President & CEO Chris Ellington.

Lab tests that were selected as part of the on-demand panel include preventative wellness tests, endocrine and metabolic testing, cardiovascular and anemia

evaluation. Other tests include urinalysis, pregnancy testing and infectious disease as well as a robust selection of hormone and allergy testing.

Patients, ages 18 or older, may visit the Main Laboratory on the hospital campus or UNC Health Southeastern Drive Thru Express Lab, for the testing, with results processed and delivered within 24 hours via MyChart.

In the event of a critical result, patients will be contacted by phone; however, it will be the responsibility of the

patient to inform their primary care physician about abnormal or critical test results that may require immediate medical care.

The Cash Price Laboratory service is set to launch on Jan. 14. UNC Health Southeastern Main Laboratory hours are Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and the UNC Health Southeastern Drive Thru Express Lab is open Monday through Friday from 6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. To learn more, call 910-671-5072.

Erin Hunt is the laboratory director for UNC Health Southeastern.



Erin Hunt
UNC Health Southeastern

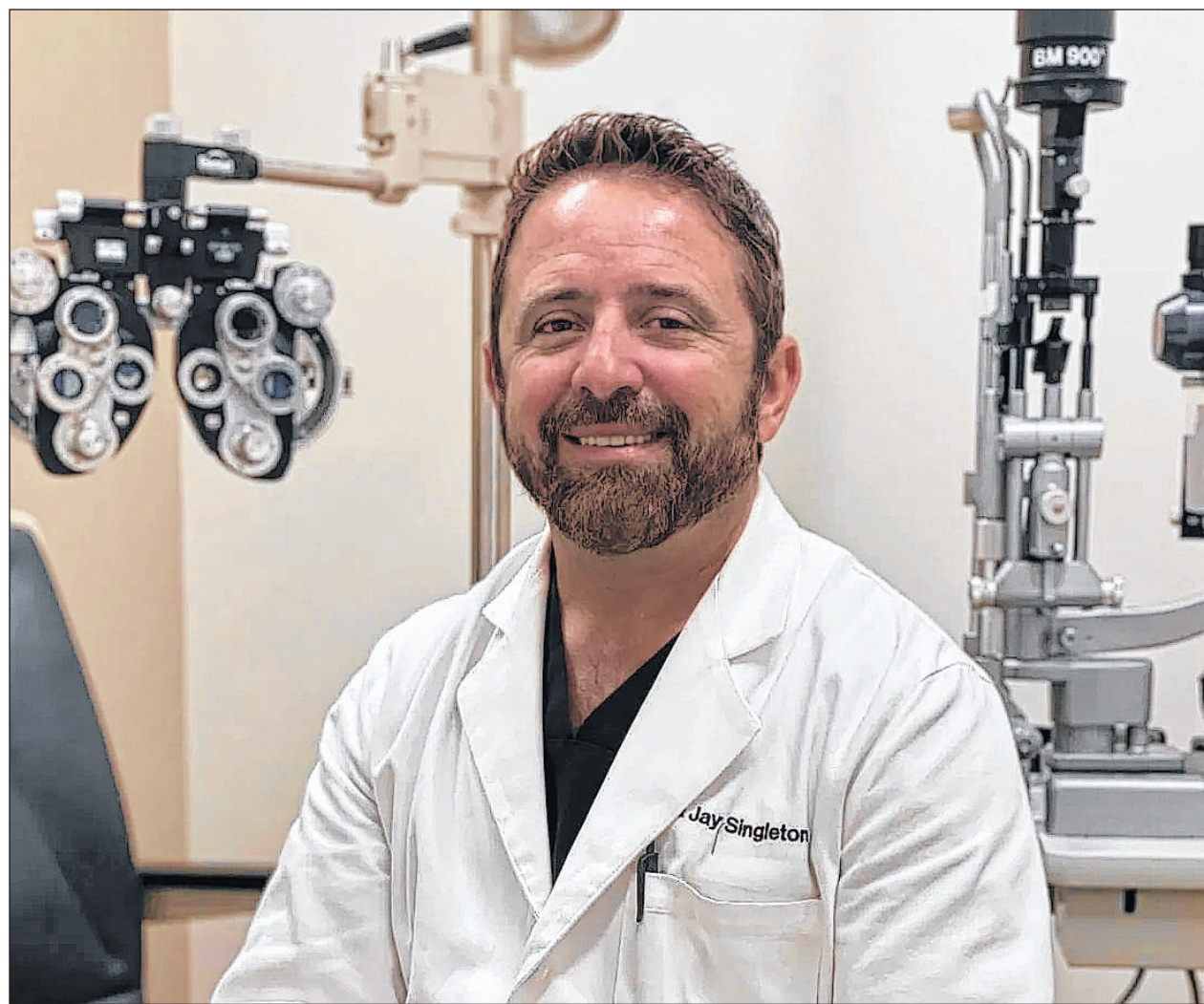


Photo courtesy of The Institute for Justice

Jay Singleton, an ophthalmologist from New Bern, is challenging the North Carolina certificate of need law.

Judges reject arguments against NC Certificate of Need law

Jane Winik Sartwell
Carolina Public Press

A challenge of the constitutionality of North Carolina's Certificate of Need law may be heading back to the state Supreme Court.

On Dec. 19, a three-judge panel of superior court judges ruled unanimously against New Bern optometrist Jay Singleton, who alleged that Certificate of Need law restricts the right to earn a living and creates illegal monopolies.

The case was sent down to the panel by the Supreme Court last year, when the high court decided that Singleton's argument was not just about his situation, but about the constitutionality of the law as a whole.

Certificate of Need law mandates that health care providers cannot expand services — be it new MRI machines, hospital beds or operating rooms — unless they are filling a pre-identified need.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services identifies these needs by looking at popula-

tion numbers, demographics and utilization of various health care facilities, services and equipment to see what local area needs what. Health care providers then apply to meet those needs.

Singleton wanted to dedicate a room to provide more complex, invasive procedures. The state told him it was illegal without a Certificate of Need. Why? There is no identified "need" for more operating room capacity in New Bern — beyond what is already provided by CarolinaEast Medical Center.

Singleton is arguing that the law grants exclusive privileges to CarolinaEast and creates a monopoly, while simultaneously restricting his economic liberty to earn a living.

The three-court panel, which consisted of Republican Judge Jeffrey Foster of Pitt County, Republican Judge Troy Stafford of Iredell County and Democratic Judge Jacqueline Grant of Buncombe County, didn't agree with Singleton.

The panel found that the law serves the pub-

lic interest, pursuing the legitimate purpose of protecting public health and affordable health care through reasonable means. They also found that no monopoly actually exists, considering that New Bern residents can access 80 operating rooms from nine different providers in the wider region.

Singleton's lawyers are planning to appeal this decision, though this case has already been through the appellate process once.

"In 2023, the North Carolina Supreme Court granted review in this case to resolve foundational questions about the North Carolina Constitution's protections for the right to earn a living," Singleton's lawyer Joshua Windham told Carolina Public Press.

"Last fall, the court sent us back down to the trial court to proceed through a three-judge panel because the allegations of our complaint, if proven, could render the CON law unconstitutional across the board.

"We have now complied with that instruc-

tion. The three-judge panel appears to have largely adopted the government's legal theories, which remain as wrong today as they have always been. We look forward to taking this fight back to the North Carolina Supreme Court, which we expect will treat the CON law with the genuine skepticism it deserves under the North Carolina Constitution."

If the Court of Appeals rules against Singleton, he could petition for a discretionary review from the Supreme Court. Or, the Court of Appeals could certify the case directly to the Supreme Court. That's possible, given the significant public interest and constitutional implications of this case.

Whether the Supreme Court would choose to hear it again remains to be seen.

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