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Finding the Truth II:

Are Popular Nutrition and Health Information Sources Reliable?

Julie Garden-Robinson, Ph.D., R.D., L.R.D., Food and Nutrition Specialist

Most people are interested in nutrition and health. In fact, nutrition or health websites were the most sought sources of information followed by Google or Internet searches (National Library of Medicine, 2023).

Who do they trust? According to a 2017 study by the International Food Information Council, eight in 10 survey respondents encountered conflicting information about what to eat or avoid on different websites. About one in four consumers (28%) said they rely on friends and family for nutrition and food information, which tops other sources, including conversations with registered dietitian nutritionists, health-focused websites and the news.

On the other hand, a 2023 study from the National Library of Medicine says the advice of nutrition professionals was sought more than friends, colleagues or peers. Contrary to some past research, this data showed that people trust nutrition professionals more than websites.

We're all bombarded with information about nutrition and health. We might hear a celebrity discussing a new diet on a radio or TV talk show. We might watch an infomercial about a fitness device. While reading our favorite magazine, an ad might alert us to a new "low-carb" food product. A friend might forward an email pointing out the risks of a food additive. We might receive an ad in our mailbox for a new dietary supplement, or we could pick up information sheets at a health food or grocery store. While surfing the web, we might click on site with nutrition information.

With all this information available, how do we separate fact from fiction? What are the clues to reliable health information in today's fast-paced world?

This publication explores a few popular nutrition information sources and ways to determine if the information is reliable.

Should I believe what I read about foods and dietary supplements in ads? Can I believe food labels?

Ads and food labels have different purposes. The goal of advertising is to sell a product. Food labels are meant to inform consumers about what's in a particular food. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) oversees ads for diet, fitness and health products. The Food and Drug



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Fargo, North Dakota

Administration (FDA) regulates food labels, including Nutrition Facts labels and health claims.

Any statement listed on a food package must meet the FDA guidelines. For example, "low-fat" foods must have less than 3 grams of fat per serving and "low-calorie" foods must have less than 40 calories per serving. If a product has a claim that says it is "heart healthy," it must meet strict guidelines. When evaluating weight-loss ads and other health/fitness products, the FTC recommends a healthy portion of skepticism.

Example: Low-Carb Foods

Because no legal definition for low carb existed, food products legally could not be labeled low carb on the package.

Can you lose weight on high-protein, low-carb diets?

Yes, you can lose weight on any diet that's lower in calories than what you're burning; however, most people regain weight unless they have made a lifestyle change. Nutrition professionals recommend a balanced, varied diet, with all food groups eaten in moderation.

Are low-carb foods and diets healthier? Nutrition researchers don't know all the answers because most of the studies are less than six months long. Nutrition researchers do have concerns about focusing on foods high in protein and fat. Many health professionals argue that through time, following such diets may put people at risk for heart disease, kidney disease, osteoporosis, gout and other health issues.

- See links to health information at the end of the publication.

Example: Dietary Supplements

Dietary supplements include vitamins, minerals, herbs, fiber and other items. The FDA oversees them, but they are not regulated as foods or drugs. The manufacturer does not have to prove the product is safe or effective. The FDA must prove the supplements are unsafe to remove them from the market.

In general, manufacturers do not have to register their product with the FDA or get approval before selling their product. Product labels on supplements should be truthful

and not misleading. Therefore, choosing to use supplements becomes a matter of buyer beware.

Most supplement products will not hurt us, but many probably won't help us. Many in the medical field actually recommend some, such as once-a-day type vitamin/mineral supplements. Other products could be harmful. For example, Ephedra, a weight-loss aid, was removed from the market after deaths were reported

- If you choose to take a supplement, do your homework.
- Look for a USP designation, a measure of purity and potency of the product.
- Let your physician know what you're taking because some supplements interact with medications.
- For vitamin/mineral supplements, read the Supplement Facts labels. Most nutrition professionals advise staying at 100% of the daily recommendations.
- Check out the science-based information available from the Office of Dietary Supplements at <http://ods.od.nih.gov/>.



Should I trust email scares? What are some clues?

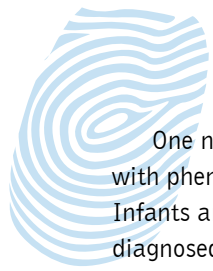
If you use email, chances are you've received a few unsolicited ads about nutrition or health products. Or maybe a friend has forwarded an email about health that sounded a little scary.

Email scares and hoaxes often give the appearance of credibility by citing organizations with impressive names, doctors, researchers and lots of medical/scientific jargon. Often the emails feature CAPITAL letters and lots of punctuation!!!!

An example that keeps resurfacing concerns the safety of aspartame (sold as Equal or Nutrasweet), an artificial sweetener used in many low-calorie foods. The email scare blames aspartame for causing a variety of illnesses, including multiple sclerosis and fibromyalgia.

However, the "aspartame disease" email scare is not research based. Aspartame is one of the most thoroughly tested substances in the food supply, and the FDA regulates its use.

The safety was confirmed in a published study in which scientists found that consuming an amount far greater than an average person would consume (the equivalent of 19 to 24 cans of diet soda pop daily) had no effect on mood, memory, behavior or the brain in adult women. Therefore, consuming a moderate amount does not pose a risk.



One note of caution: Aspartame is not safe for those with phenylketonuria, or PKU, a rare genetic disorder. Infants are tested for this condition at birth, and if diagnosed with this condition, they need a special diet throughout your life. For more information about food additives, visit the FDA website: www.fda.gov.

If you receive an email you can't quite believe, sometimes these websites can help you sort through the information:

- www.snopes.com provides information about scams, urban legends, myths, rumors and misinformation.
- www.quackwatch.org is an international network of people who are concerned about health-related frauds, myths, fads, fallacies and misconduct.

How reliable is the information on websites?

It depends. With billions of websites in cyberspace, a search for a particular health-related topic may result in hundreds of hits. Deciphering trustworthy information from quackery can be difficult.

Sometimes, the URL suffix (for example, .gov, used by many government agencies, or .edu, used by many educational institutions) gives an indication of the reliability of the information. Websites with a .com suffix sometimes are reliable organizational sites (such as www.webmd.com) and sometimes they are purely commercial.

Ask these questions as you explore nutrition and health information:

- Who is the author?
- What are his or her credentials?
- Is a credible sponsoring institution identified?
- What is the purpose of the information?
- Is the site promoting or selling a particular product?
- Is the information based on scientific research or opinion?
- Is a date listed? How current is the information?
- Does the information have links to other sources of information? (This sometimes provides a clue to reliability, but not always. Anyone can link to another organization's website.)
- Are the facts documented with sound scientific references? Or is the information solely based on personal testimonials?

- Does an editorial board oversee the content?
- Is the information well written in terms of grammar and spelling? What is the tone of the writing? Does it take a balanced approach?

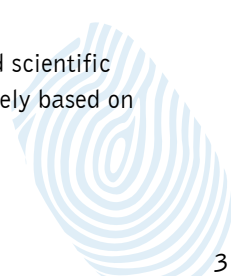
Who do I trust to provide accurate information?

Consulting a nutritionist doesn't necessarily mean you're getting reliable nutrition information. Getting a fake degree in nutrition is easy if done online, and most states allow anyone to use the title nutritionist. The person using the title may have no formal academic education in nutrition. Often you just have to pay a fee to get a certificate.

However, a person with the title licensed nutritionist (L.N.) has completed specific academic coursework and met other licensure requirements to use the title. Licensed nutritionists in North Dakota also have to meet continuing education requirements.

Registered dietitians (R.D.) complete an undergraduate degree from an accredited institution with courses in nutrition, food science and many other subjects; complete internship hours; and pass a national examination. Some work in clinical settings such as hospitals, and others work in public health, Extension offices, food service management, food industry or other places.

Extension agents usually have degrees in family and consumer sciences, food and nutrition, education or a related area. Some are licensed nutritionists and some are registered dietitians. All receive regular training in nutrition and food safety, and distribute research-based information.





Health and Nutrition-related Websites to Explore

These websites offer free evidence-based information about health and wellness.

- **Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics:** provides information on nutrition and health
www.eatright.org
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** provides health information on diseases, health risks and prevention guidelines
www.cdc.gov
- **Food and Drug Administration:** regulates food and drugs, and oversees dietary supplements www.fda.gov
- **Federal Citizen Information Center:** provides consumer information on topics ranging from food/health to computers and cars
www.usa.gov
- **Healthfinder:** a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services gateway site that provides links to reviewed resources on consumer health
www.healthfinder.gov
- **U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans:** Provides tips about healthful eating, which are updated based on current research every five years
www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines
- **NDSU Extension:** has many online publications and other reliable information.
www.ag.ndsu.edu/food



For more information on this and other topics, see www.ndsu.edu/extension

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