Fall Session - Year 3

Making Sense of Health News

During this session, you will:

- *Identify current sources of personal health information*
- *Discuss the key issues to focus on when evaluating health information*
- *Practice evaluating health information*

Review of Progress/Success

- **How did you handle meeting your WHI goals during the summer months?**
- **What strategies and skills do you think helped you the most in maintaining your continued success?**

Sources of Health Information

Surveys show that American consumers rely on the news media for most of their information about nutrition and food safety. However, the headlines are frequently more confusing than helpful. This session will:

- **Prepare you to evaluate and question some of the health information you read or hear.**
- **Help you understand the difference between science and personal opinion.**

Most of us use many different sources for health information. For example, when we move to a new location, we might ask neighbors, or call a medical service to ask about a good doctor or dentist.

In everyday living, we hear news on the radio, talk to family and friends, watch TV, and read newspapers and magazines. We might even look at the tabloids while waiting in the check-out line at the grocery store. Some of us even get health news from the computer.

Why don't you begin by looking at some of your current sources for health information? Picture the last time you made a heath-related decision. It may have been your decision to participate in the WHI study, join a health club, or begin taking certain vitamins.

- **What sources of information did you use when making your decision?**
- **Which information sources do you think were the most helpful?**
- **What influence does the media have on your health decisions (e.g., TV, newspapers, etc.)?**

Consumers often complain that health news is confusing. It tosses them from headline to opposing headline. For example, one study may proclaim that "coffee increases your risk of heart disease" then a month later the headlines read: "new study finds coffee is not related to risk of heart disease."

Scientific research is slow and time consuming. It's like putting together a large jigsaw puzzle. Most of those "well-publicized" headlines that you see are just one piece of the puzzle. Researchers need a lot of pieces before they can decide what the whole picture looks like.

Why is it important for you to become skilled at reading and evaluating health information? Well, first, it can help you identify reliable information. Second, it can help you apply the best available information to your own personal health decisions.

Evaluating Health Information

Even if you don't have special training in science, here are a few basic questions you can ask yourself as you read health-related articles:

- **What's the information source?**
- **How was the study designed?**

Source of Information

There are many different ways that scientists search for new information about health. However, to be considered worthwhile, health information needs to be:

- **Not influenced by any personal beliefs or values, and**
- **The result of many studies, not just one.**

Here are some things to consider when you evaluate the information source:

Personal Experience: Be careful of reports of personal experience or testimonials, particularly when the authors are trying to sell a product or procedure. The reports may make the news, but what happens to one person, or even a few people, may be due to chance.

For example, earlier this year (1996), a TV station announced that a research team reported that wearing bras increased a woman's risk of developing cysts and potentially breast cancer. The reporter commented that the researcher's findings were based on personal experience and observation.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to know from a few personal experiences if there is a relationship between two factors. In other words, breast cysts occur in women who don't wear bras, and bras are commonly worn by women who never develop breast cysts. Thus, in individual cases, researchers cannot always see the difference between relationship and chance.

Hidden Motives: Search for possible hidden motives when you look at a news article or report. See if you can identify who paid for the study and where the study was done. Decide if any special interest group would gain or lose by showing particular results.

For example, what thoughts would you have if a meat group reported a study showing that people should eat a side of beef each day? Or, what concerns would you have if an anti-meat group did a study that showed that meat is poisonous? These examples are both potential conflicts of interest and should trigger an alarm to make you stop and think about the results.

Where the Information is Published: Look at the article and see if you can identify the scientific journal where the study was published. Articles that appear in scientific journals have been approved by panels of medical professionals, so they have undergone review by fellow scientists. On the other hand, a study released at a medical meeting may be on the cutting edge of science, but more research may be necessary.

Dramatic Headlines or Promises of Easy Answers: Look past the headlines. News headlines, TV news reports and advertisements are designed to catch your attention. However, they often provide only part of the story. You need to question headlines that make bold or extreme statements, promise easy answers, or sound too good to be true. In addition, be careful of headlines and articles that tell you that a particular procedure or food is "bad" or "good". Many of these articles are probably false, incomplete or misleading.

Qualifying Words: Reports that use words such as "may," "seem," or "in some cases" are usually more reliable. The researchers want you to interpret the study results with caution. So, they use these words to indicate to readers that the study results are not definite or may not apply to everyone. Remember—the results of one study rarely prove anything.

Study Design

As you read health information, keep your eyes open for answers to some of the following questions:

- **What type of study was done?**
- **Who took part in the study?**
- **How many people were in the study?**
- **How long did the study last?**

The two types of research studies most commonly used with people are:

- **Studies that follow and observe groups of people (Observational studies), and**
- **Studies that test ways to prevent or treat a disease (Intervention studies).**

Observational Studies: follow a population or group of people to see if they can identify any factors that are connected with a disease.

This type of study creates a lot of media attention because it is usually very large. For example, the WHI Observational Study will have 100,000 women participating.

The benefit of observational studies is that they help to provide some clues and direction for future research. However, they cannot usually prove the cause of a disease because it's difficult for them to separate potential risk factors from each other. What does this mean?

Well, look at the following example: In the 1970s and '80s, some observational studies associated coffee drinking with the risk of developing heart disease. Yet, other studies could not match these results. Coffee drinking as a risk factor for people with heart disease could not be separated from all the other characteristics or risk factors also common to coffee drinkers (e.g., smoking, high-fat foods, less exercise, etc.).

So, how are studies that test ways to treat or prevent a disease different?

Intervention Studies: are considered to be the "gold standard" of all studies because they are carefully designed to avoid chance results. Intervention studies, like the WHI Dietary Study can provide much stronger evidence about the cause and treatment of a disease.

In intervention studies, random assignment is important to keep researchers fair and neutral. This is why the WHI Dietary Study randomly assigns Dietary Study participants to either the Dietary Change or the Comparison group. Both randomization assignments are difficult and both demand some dedication.

The WHI Clinical Trials (Dietary Modification, Hormone Replacement Therapy and Calcium/ Vitamin D) provide good examples of randomized, controlled intervention studies.

- **How important do you think it is to know who participated in a study?**

Type of Participants: When you read a health-related article, look at who participated in the study. Were the people like you (age, sex, etc.)? The type of participants involved in a study will affect how well the information relates to you and any health decisions you make.

For example, past intervention studies about heart disease only included men, since middle-aged men were more likely to have heart disease than middle-aged women. Researchers assumed that many of the study results could be used for women, as well as men. However, it is now known that the results found in men may not apply to women of a similar age. This was one of the reasons that the WHI was funded.

- **How could the number of participants or the length of a study influence the results?**

Number of Participants: The article should also tell you how many people took part in the study because the smaller the number of participants, the greater the chance that the findings lead to the wrong conclusions.

Length of Study: It is also important to know how long the study lasted. The length of a study is particularly important when the disease being followed is cancer or heart disease. Both of these diseases take a long time to develop, so a study needs to allow enough time to see differences between the groups. This is why the WHI study will last an average of 9 years.

Fact or Fiction (Practice)

Now, see if you can use the guidelines that were presented in this session. Find a nutrition or health-related article you want to evaluate. Use the checklist provided on Worksheet Fall 3-1 and the information in the Resource Fall 3-1 *Evaluating Health Information.*

Go through your article and highlight the key points and information you can find. Compare this information to the information suggested on Worksheet Fall 3-1 (pg. 9).

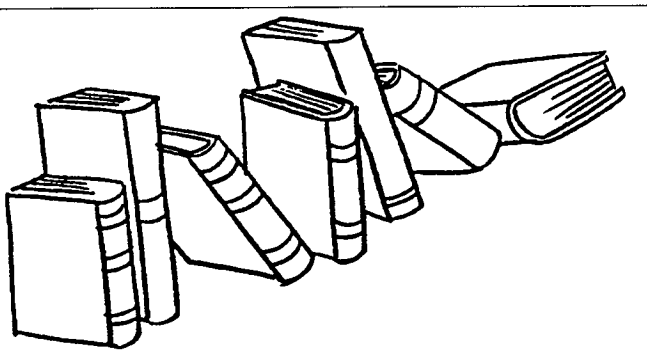
Compare the article's headline to the text and decide if the article supports the impression you received from the headline.

- **How well does your impression from the headline compare to the information in the article?**

Sometimes when you read a newspaper article, or see a report on TV, you may have some questions.

- **What questions do you have after reading the article?**
- **Where could you find reliable answers to your questions?**

If you need more information to help you make reliable health decisions, use some of the ideas provided on Resource Fall 3-2 *Resources for Reliable Nutrition Information.*



Summary

When you read or hear the "latest research" results in the news, don't jump to conclusions. Remember, a single study is not a good reason for changing your health habits.

In addition, keep up your good work and participation in the WHI. You are an important partner in advancing the scientific knowledge about women's health issues and the role of diet in the prevention of cancer and heart disease.

Your contributions are greatly appreciated.

Question for Thought:

- **Which guidelines do you think will be the most helpful for you in evaluating health information?**

Home Activity

Areas to work on during the next three months:

- **Use your Fat Scan (or other self-monitoring method) to monitor your intake of fat, fruits/vegetables and grains. Please keep at least one Fat Scan (or other tool) each month.**
- **If possible, evaluate a newspaper or magazine article on health using the checklist provided in Worksheet Fall 3-1 and the guidelines provided in the Resource Fall 3-1 at the end of your Fall Year 3 Participant materials.**

Evaluation:

- **Which guidelines did I find the most helpful in evaluating health information?**

Checklist for Reading Health Information

Read your scientific article, then see how much information your article contains. The more "yes" answers you can check off, the more believable the story. If your checkmarks are mainly "no" or "don't know," consider looking for more information before making any decisions. Don't be surprised if you can't find the answers to all these questions in the news reports you hear or read.

	Yes	No	Don't know
1. Source of Information:			
Are the conclusions based on objective research and not testimonials or personal experiences?	❑	❑	❑
Can you tell where the study was done?	❑	❑	❑
Do you know who paid for the study?	❑	❑	❑
Would the authors of the study have any economic or other stakes in the research results?	❑	❑	❑
Was the study published in a scientific journal?	❑	❑	❑
Is the headline or title misleading after reading the article?	❑	❑	❑
Are qualifying words such as "may", or "probably", etc., used?	❑	❑	❑
2. Study Design:			
Do you know what type of research was done (observational, intervention)?	❑	❑	❑
Do you know the type of participants in the study (i.e., age, male/female, etc.)?	❑	❑	❑
Do you know how many people took part in the study?	❑	❑	❑
Do you know the length of the study?	❑	❑	❑

Worksheet Fall 3-1 (continuation)

My health article or ad was: ❑ Believable ❑ Not Believable

Questions I still have about my health article or ad: _____

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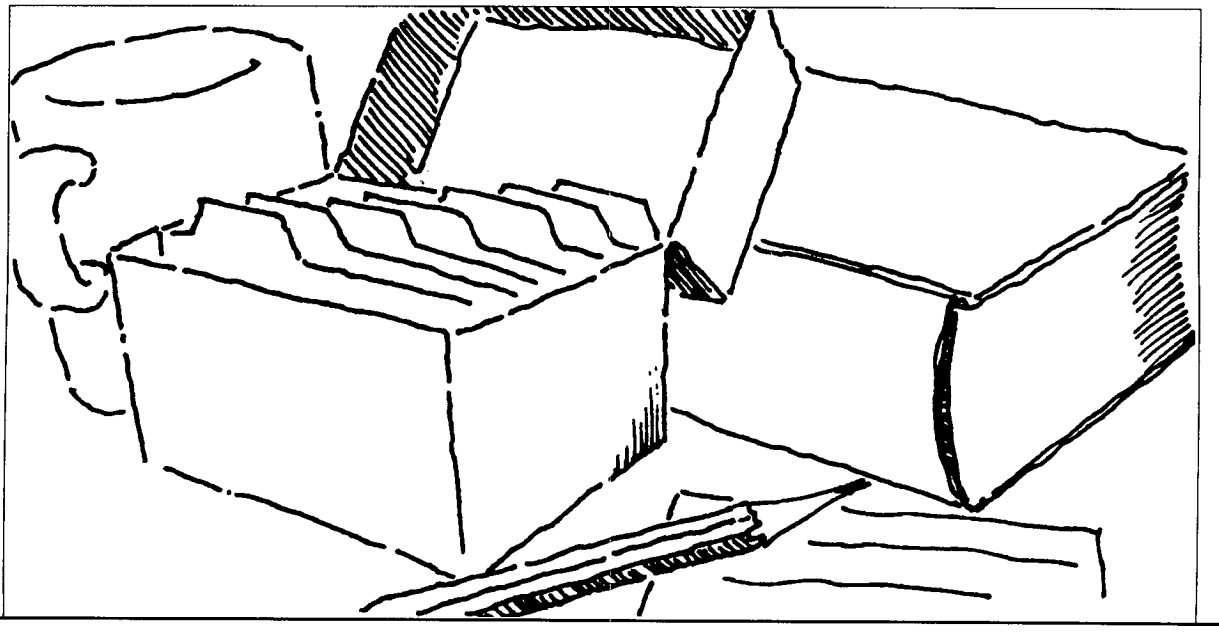
Fall Session - Year 3

Recipes

- *Broccoli Salad*
- *Cranberry Waldorf Salad*
- *Creamy Fruit Dip*
- *Turkey French Dip*



Broccoli Salad

2-1/2 cups fresh broccoli, chopped, uncooked
1/2 cup raisins
2 tablespoons sunflower seeds, unsalted
2 tablespoons red onion, diced
1-1/2 tablespoons imitation bacon-flavored soy bits (e.g., Bacos, etc.)
2 tablespoons plain non-fat yogurt
2 tablespoons fat-free mayonnaise
1-1/2 tablespoons vinegar
1 tablespoon sugar (or equivalent in artificial sweetener)

Combine broccoli, raisins, sunflower seeds, onion and soy bits. Mix remaining ingredients together and add to broccoli mixture. Toss well to coat. Chill for 2 hours or longer for flavors to blend.

Note: For a change, you can replace the imitation bacon bits with 2-3 tablespoons of chopped red pepper.

Makes 3 cups (6-1/2 cup servings)

Fat: 2 grams per 1/2 cup serving

Fruit/Vegetable Servings: 1 per 1/2 cup serving

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Cranberry Waldorf Salad

1-1/2 cups chopped cranberries
1 cup apple, chopped
1 cup celery, chopped
1 cup green seedless grapes, halved
1/3 cup raisins
1/4 cup walnuts, chopped
2 tablespoons sugar (or sweetener)
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1 carton (8 ounces) vanilla yogurt, nonfat

Mix all ingredients together and toss. Cover and chill for at least 2 hours.

Makes 9 servings.

Fat: 2 grams per serving

Fruit/Vegetable Servings: 1 per serving

Recipe from La Jolla WHI Clinical Center

Creamy Fruit Dip

1 countainer (8 ounces) fat-free or light cream cheese, softened
1 jar (7 ounces) marshmallow creme
3 tablespoons orange juice
1 teaspoon orange peel (dried or fresh)

In a mixing bowl, beat softened cream cheese until smooth. Add marshmallow creme; beat until smooth. Add orange juice and peel. Chill until ready to serve. Serve with fresh fruit of your choice.

Makes 2 cups (32 tablespoons).

Fat: 0 grams per tablespoon if fat-free cream cheese is used.

1 gram per tablespoon if light cream cheese is used

Recipe from Six Ingredients or Less Cooking Light and Healthy

Turkey French Dip

Here's a delicious way to use the turkey leftover from Thanksgiving.

2 ounces cooked turkey breast, sliced
2 (6-inch) French rolls
2 ounces part-skim mozzarella cheese
1 package au jus gravy mix

Preheat oven to 400°F. Cut French rolls lengthwise. Place 1 ounce of turkey and 1 ounce of mozzarella cheese on each roll. Wrap each roll in aluminum foil and heat in oven for 10 minutes. Mix au jus according to the package directions or add more water to reduce the salty flavor. Slice each sandwich in half, diagonally. Serve each with 1/3 cup of au jus.

Note: Use leftover turkey or sliced turkey from the deli for a quick meal. For variety, you can omit the cheese and just use 2 ounces of turkey on each sandwich.

Makes: 2 sandwiches

Fat: 8 grams per sandwich and 1/3 cup au jus

Grain Servings: 2 per sandwich

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Evaluating Health Information

Red Flags When Reading:

- Promises a quick fix. Don't look for a "magic bullet" to prevent or cure all ills.
- Frightful warnings of danger from a single product or regimen.
- Claims that sound too good to be true.
- Recommendations are made to help sell a product.
- Recommendations are based on stories of personal experience (testimonials) or unpublished studies.
- Health recommendations are based on a single study.
- Dramatic statements that are challenged by respectable scientific organizations.
- Simple conclusions are drawn from a complex study.
- There are lists of "good" and "bad" foods.
- Recommendations ignore differences among individuals or groups.

Meaning of Words Used:

◆ "maybe"	This does not mean "will."
◆ "contributes to", "is linked to" or "is associated with"	These phrases do not mean "causes."
◆ "proves"	Scientific studies gather evidence in a systematic way, but rarely does one study prove everything.
◆ "significant"	A result is "statistically significant" when the association between two factors has been found to be greater than what might occur at random. This is worked out by a mathematical formula. But people often take "significant" to mean "major" or "important."

Resources for Reliable Nutrition Information

Information Sources:

- WHI Group Nutritionist
- Better Business Bureau
- Hot lines
  - National Cancer Information Service: 1-800-4-CANCER
  - American Dietetic Association, Consumer Nutrition: 1-800-223-9994
  - Other: _____
- National Cancer Institute
- National Health Information Center
- National Women's Health Network
- Nutrition Newsletters/Periodicals
  - Berkeley Wellness Letter
  - Tufts University
  - Environmental Nutrition
  - FDA Consumer
  - Consumer Reports on Health
  - Mayo Clinic Health Letter
  - Other: _____
- US Food and Drug Administration
- World Wide Web site: www.eatright.org
- Other Resources:

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