Health News: Help, Hope or Hype?

If you find the daily headlines about health and dietary advice confusing, you’re not alone. In a 1997 National Health Council survey, 68 percent of consumers agreed with the statement “When reporting medical and health news, the media often contradict themselves, so I don’t know what to believe.”

Each year thousands of clinical studies are published in medical journals—that’s a lot of “latest studies” to hear about. These studies usually suggest ways we can improve our health and decrease our risk of disease. But you might feel like you need a scoreboard to keep track of it all.

Nutrition information can be very confusing. For example, a recent study found that low-fat diets were linked with strokes. Another story proclaimed: “Low-Fat Diets Harm Older Women.” Then when you eat, all those headlines come flooding back...should you put margarine on that toast, or go back to butter? What about a glass of wine with dinner; will it help your heart or make you more likely to get breast cancer?

Those headlines about low-fat diets being harmful can make you a little uncertain. You might even worry about your WHI eating plan. But be assured. Other studies of women following low-fat diets were safely done before WHI. The study is also overseen by a safety monitoring board to ensure the health and safety of WHI’s participants. We don’t know yet what positive effects the eating plan might have and that’s the reason for this part of the study.

It’s best to look at the big picture when trying to understand the headlines. Think of each study as one more piece of the puzzle. There are some questions you can ask to tell the difference between help and hype in the news:

■ What kind of study was it? This is a very important question, but it’s rarely answered by most news stories. The most reliable studies are those that follow people for a long period of time after they’ve been divided at random into an “intervention” group—like your Dietary Change group—and a “control” group, which does not get the treatment being tested—like the women in WHI who are following their normal way of eating. This type of study allows researchers to compare groups that are alike in all ways (except for which group they’re in) so they can tell if the treatment helped prevent disease.

■ How big was the study? The study that prompted the headline, “Low-Fat Diets Harm Older Women” followed only 10 women for three weeks. Compare that to over 19,000 women in the Dietary Change part of WHI, who are being followed for 8-12 years. The bigger the study group and the longer the study, the more important and accurate the findings are.

Unfortunately, a lot of “latest studies” are based...
ODE TO FAT COUNTERS

Arnold Puckett, husband of participant Hazel Puckett, penned this poem in honor of his wife and her fellow Dietary Change participants at the Birmingham Clinical Center (pictured below):

GRAM-MAS
The Women’s Health Initiative
As the title indicates
Is concerned with ladies’ health
Which includes their food choices.
From UAB, in Birmingham
Their unit did expand
To include a group in Huntsville
My spouse has joined that clan.
The ladies count each gram of fat
Which passes through their jaws,
They have a nurse to suit the group
They call themselves, “GRAM-MAS.”
Call me “Jack Sprat,” I eat no fat
There is so little of it around
Low-fat food and no-fat food
Within my house abound.
I’ve learned a lot from GRAM-MAS.

LOW-FAT BITES

- Whether you’re looking for a new side dish to spice up your meals or a way to jazz up a favorite recipe, Vegetables Hot in Spicy Mixed Vegetables and Cajun Mixed Vegetables fit the bill. The Hot ‘n Spicy mix contains carrots, corn, green beans, onions, red peppers, and jalapeño peppers in a zesty sauce. The Cajun vegetables combine small kidney beans, carrots, corn, celery, green peppers, and onions in a Cajun sauce. Both types are fat-free. A 15-ounce can is about 70 cents. Recent studies show that canned vegetables are as nutritious as fresh and frozen vegetables.

- Peanut butter is a great source of protein, but it is also packed with fat! Just one tablespoon contains 8 grams of fat. Try blending equal portions of peanut butter and low-fat cream cheese; add honey to taste. A tablespoon of this mixture contains half the fat of regular peanut butter.

- With the chill of autumn in the air, a bowl of soup is always comforting. Check out Progresso’s 99% Fat Free Soups in such tempting flavors as White Cheddar Potato, Creamy Mushroom Chicken, and New England Clam Chowder. Each cup contains 1.5 to 2.5 grams of fat. The 16-ounce cans sell for 99 cents to $1.39. Tip: If you make homemade soup, you can thicken it with instant potato flakes.

The information provided in this section is not an endorsement by WHI of specific food products.
Spicy Skillet Dinner

1 lb. diet-lean (~9% fat) ground beef
1 pkg. (1 1/4 oz.) dry taco seasoning mix
1 cup water
1 can (15 oz.) Veg-All Hot 'n Spicy Mixed Vegetables, with liquid
1 1/2 cups instant rice, uncooked

1. In a large skillet, brown meat. Drain excess fat.
2. Stir in taco seasoning mix. Blend well.
3. Add water. Simmer uncovered for 10 minutes.
4. Add Veg-All Hot 'n Spicy Mixed Vegetables, with liquid, and heat through.
5. Add uncooked rice. Blend well. Cover and simmer 5 minutes or until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender. Stir again. Serve hot.

Serving suggestion: May be served on its own, or in taco shells, topped with grated non-fat cheddar cheese.

Makes 8 servings

Fat: 1 gram per serving
Fruits/Vegetable Servings: 1/2 per serving
Grain Servings: 1 per serving

Recipe from Dean Foods Vegetable Company
Turkey Piccata

1 lemon
1/3 cup flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons oil
1/2 cup 'at-free chicken broth
1/2 teaspoon sugar
4 turkey cutlets (about 1 pound), sliced in half
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1 clove garlic, minced
1 teaspoon capers, drained (optional)
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped

1. With a sharp knife, remove skin and white pith from lemon and discard. Cut the lemon segments away from their surrounding membranes into a bowl (discard seeds). Chop lemon segments coarsely.

2. Place turkey cutlets between sheets of plastic wrap and pound with the bottom of a heavy pan or with a meat mallet to an even 1/4-inch thickness. Combine flour, salt, and pepper in a plastic bag. Dredge turkey lightly in the flour mixture, shaking off the excess.

3. Heat 1 teaspoon of oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Cook half of the turkey for 2-3 minutes per side, or until the outside is golden brown and the interior is no longer pink. Transfer to a platter and keep warm. Repeat with remaining oil and turkey. (Do not wash the skillet between batches.)

4. Add garlic and chicken broth to the skillet. Bring to a boil and cook, stirring for 1 minute, scraping up brown bits. Add lemon, capers, and sugar and cook 30 seconds longer. Spoon sauce over the turkey. Sprinkle with parsley and grind more fresh black pepper over the top.

Makes 4 servings

Fat: 5.5 grams per serving

Recipe from Secrets of Low-Fat Cooking
— Eating Well Books
Understanding Health News

Read the following article, and then see how much information it really gives you. This article was taken from a portion of a health column in a nationally distributed newspaper. The column was titled “Low-Fat Isn’t Always Best.”

**Sample Article**

Low-Fat Diets Harm Older Women

As women enter menopause, their risk of heart disease increases. One common recommendation—so drastically cut fat and cut more carbohydrates—is a bad idea, says Stanford University’s Gerald Reaven, M.D.

In recent tests, he put healthy postmenopausal women on two diets. On a low-fat (25 percent of calories) and high carbohydrate (60 percent of calories) diet, bad triglycerides rose and good HDL dropped, dramatically boosting the chances of developing heart disease. The high-carbo diet also drove up blood sugar and insulin levels, adding to the risk of heart disease.

Reaven insists that a diet high in fat (45 percent of calories, mostly olive oil-type fat, not animal fat) and low in carbohydrates (40 percent of calories) reduces heart disease better than an overall low-fat diet.

Now judge this article by answering the following questions. The more "yes" answers, the more believable the story.

1. **Source of Information**
   - Are the conclusions based on research and not testimonials? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - Do you know who paid for the study, and who got paid? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - Was the study published in a scientific journal? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__

2. **Study Design**
   - Do you know if this was an intervention study? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - Do you know the type of participants in the study (age, sex, etc.)? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - Do you know how many people took part in the study, and for how long? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__

3. **Risk Assessment**
   - Did the writer avoid words like "all" and "bad," and use words like "may" or "some"? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - If these findings differ from other studies, does the article explain why? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - How many times has information about the risk/benefit trade-offs of following the study’s advice? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - Do you know how these risks and benefits compare with other factors (e.g., physical fitness, family history of disease) that may also contribute to your health? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__
   - Does the article state any limitations or shortcomings that the study may have? __Yes__ __No__ __Don't Know__

After completing this, most of your answers should be "no" or "don’t know." Try using this test on other news stories.
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on just a handful of people.

What’s being studied?
Was the study done on people, animals, or in a lab? What works in a test tube or in animals may not hold true for people. Studies carried out on people (clinical trials) have the most impact. If people were studied, were the intervention and control groups alike? Furthermore, do the findings apply to you? Studies of men may be interesting, but they may not apply to women.

What do the words really mean?
“Associated with” or “linked to” doesn’t mean “is caused by.” Explanations about risk can also be misleading. Something that’s “double the risk” is worth noting, but your risk may only have changed from one in a million to two in a million—still a very small risk.

Who’s the source?
Where does the study appear? If it’s in one of the major scientific journals, it’s been reviewed by other scientists. On the other hand, if the news came from a press release, there may be profit or other motives at work. For instance, an oatmeal maker was behind headlines that read, “Instant Oatmeal Delivers Long-Lasting Energy.” That may be true, but the study author admitted he didn’t find a difference between the participants who ate instant oatmeal versus a low-fiber cereal before exercising. The news stories should tell who funded the study so you can draw your own conclusions about the study’s objectivity.

If a news story worries you, use the tool on page 3 to judge the story. Ask your nutritionist for further help. The results of one study rarely justify a complete change in your food choices or medical treatment. Just add it to your personal health “puzzle” and wait for the pieces to fall into place.