

1988

Nutrition Myths and Misinformation

Charlotte P. Brennand

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histfood

 Part of the [Nutrition Commons](#)

Warning: The information in this series may be obsolete. It is presented here for historical purposes only. For the most up to date information please visit [The Utah State University Cooperative Extension Office](#)

Recommended Citation

Brennand, Charlotte P., "Nutrition Myths and Misinformation" (1988). *Archived Food and Health Publications*. Paper 6.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histfood/6

This Factsheet is brought to you for free and open access by the Archived USU Extension Publications at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Archived Food and Health Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact dylan.burns@usu.edu.





Nutrition Myths and Misinformation

Prepared by Charlotte P. Brennan,
Food Science Specialist, Utah State University
Modified from an article by Mark A. Kantor, Ph. D.,
University of Maryland

People have been aware of the close relationship between food and life throughout history. Early man recognized that food came from the living world of plants and animals. He knew that food was essential for his survival and well being.

At first, people learned to distinguish between safe and dangerous foods by trial and error. But this was risky business. A mistake could cause sickness or even death.

As knowledge about safety accumulated, food choices became influenced by taste, availability, religious beliefs, and social taboos. In their attempt to understand nature, people also endowed foods with magical powers and healing abilities.

In those days before science, our ancestors probably believed that choosing the proper foods would make them stronger, more fertile, more spiritual, or better warriors. They even imagined they could acquire the characteristics of animals simply by eating them. For example, to become braver or stronger, all one had to do was dine on the flesh of a lion. Consuming a dog would make one nimble, while munching the genitals of hunted game would increase potency.

Foods thought to be aphrodisiacs were especially cherished. But one had to be very careful not to eat a rabbit, which would make one timid, or a hyena, which would surely cause one to become stupid!

We have come a long way, or have we? Have you seen any advertisements lately, perhaps in a popular supermarket tabloid, for a "magic" enzyme tablet that will literally melt away fat? How about a nutritional supplement that will improve your memory and make you smarter? Or special herbal teas that are guaranteed to help you lose weight and feel better or your money back?

Have you seen special protein supplements in a health food store, promising to give athletes extra energy for super-optimum performance? A similar sales pitch might have been made for lion meat a few thousand years ago. And if you think that bee pollen or wheat germ oil will make you run faster or jump higher, you had better think again.

In spite of our astonishing advances in science, nutrition myths continue to flourish. Salesmen may no longer peddle snake oil from the backs of covered wagons, but the "health" food business has never been bigger. Nutrition quackery is

estimated to cost Americans at least \$10 billion per year. The problem of nutrition misinformation is so immense that it may be the largest nutrition-related problem in the United States.

How, then, can consumers protect themselves from nutrition frauds? How does one separate fact from fiction? Although these are difficult questions, bear in mind the following points when trying to decide if the information you hear or read is true.

First and foremost, remember that nutrition is a science. It is the science of applied biochemistry and physiology. It is not just something one "believes in." Scientists learn about nutrition by performing experiments or conducting surveys using proper scientific and statistical methods.

One must, therefore, be wary of books and advertisements that make claims based on "testimonials" or "anecdotes" rather than science. For example, an author may describe how Mrs. Jones took large doses of a vitamin and her backache disappeared. Does this mean the vitamin cured her condition? Certainly not. Perhaps the backache would have disappeared by itself in a few days when she was feeling more relaxed. Or maybe she just needed a new mattress. You can see why testimonials and anecdotal evidence are not very meaningful.

A valid scientific study, on the other hand, separates truth from coincidence. Researchers examine large groups of subjects under carefully controlled, objective conditions. If the experiment is repeated, similar results should be obtained.

Only when these conditions are met can one draw logical conclusions.

Before you read a book about nutrition, check the flap or back page to see who the author is. What kind of background makes this person qualified to write a nutrition book? Where does he/she work? Did he/she attend a reputable, accredited college? Is the training really in nutrition?

It is amazing how many people who write nutrition books or claim to be "world famous nutritionists" have no valid credentials whatsoever. Such individuals may have received a worthless "nutritionist degree" from a mail-order house. Or they may be trained in another field unrelated to nutrition. An author who appears on television or consults with famous athletes is not necessarily a source of reputable information.

In a democratic society where people have freedom of speech, authors can write what they please. This freedom is guaranteed to everyone, including nutrition quacks. And book publishers are often quite happy to publish nutritional nonsense if profits can be made.

Don't believe everything you read! There are no miracle nutritional cures or magic weight loss formulas. An advertisement for an "amazing breakthrough" or a "new discovery from China" is an invitation for a rip-off. Remember, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.



Cooperative Extension Service
Utah State University