

FN1697 (Revised January 2024)



Nourish Your Mind and Body With

Accurate Health Information

How to Sort Fact From Fiction

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

Backed by scientific studies

Time-tested

Take charge of your health!

What do you have to lose?

Studies are underway

Lose weight without effort!

Health Information From Every Direction

We're all bombarded with information about nutrition and/or health in magazines and newspapers, and on TV and online through social media, blogs and YouTube videos. Also, family and friends might share information with us.

With all this information, how do we separate fact from fiction? What are the clues to reliable health information in today's fast-paced world? This publication will help you sort through the vast amount of nutrition and health-related information that is available.

NDSU | EXTENSION

North Dakota State University

Trends in Health Information



A 2017 online study of 1,002 Americans ages 18 to 80 was conducted by the International Food Information Council (IFIC). About one-third of respondents rated their friends and family as being most influential in their eating habits. Healthcare professionals, such as registered dietitians, accounted for about 14% of those most influential on health habits; however, the study also found that friends and family are a less trusted nutrition information source than health professionals.

IFIC also collaborated with the AARP Foundation to determine the practices that people 50 to 80 follow. Older adults used fewer information sources and were less likely than younger adults to use friends and family as their information sources. Compared with the younger respondents, the older respondents were more likely to cut back on foods high in sodium and high in saturated fat, and more likely to consume more whole-grain foods and smaller portions of food in general.

How Do You Learn About Health?

Have any of these happened to you?

- While reading your favorite magazine, you notice an ad about a new diet supplement to melt pounds.
- A friend forwards an email pointing out the risks of a food additive.
- You hear a celebrity discussing a new diet on a radio or TV talk show.
- While flipping through channels, you pause on an infomercial about a life-changing fitness device, special diet or supplement.
- An ad appears in your mailbox for a new dietary supplement or diet food.
- You pick up a newsletter advertising a new health food or grocery store.
- While surfing the web, you click on an ad for a website with a nutritional product for sale.
- Someone posts a message on Facebook about an amazing new vitamin supplement.

What's the Harm Anyway?

Misinformation and product scams can be harmful to people in a number of ways. Some of the more likely harmful results are:

- **Failure to seek needed medical care**
Early and timely diagnosis and treatment of some conditions can be lifesaving.
- **Failure to continue essential treatment**
You decide to take a supplement in place of your prescribed high blood pressure medication.
- **Nutrient toxicities**
Too much of essential nutrients, such as iron, can be harmful.
- **Undesirable nutrient-drug interactions**
Example: Even though high doses of vitamin E may not be toxic, they can interfere with vitamin K action and enhance the effect of anticoagulant (blood-thinning) drugs.
- **Interference with sound nutrition practices**
A balanced diet is basic to good health.
- **Wasted money**
You've lost money that could be spent on healthful foods when you spend it on remedies and cures that do not work.



Ask Yourself

Some Questions

Ponder these questions as you explore nutrition and health information:

- Who is the author?
- What are the author's credentials?
- Is a credible sponsoring institution identified?
- What is the purpose of the information?
- Is the site promoting or selling a particular product? (Commercial websites often end in .com)
- Is the information based on scientific research or opinion? (Government websites ending in .gov offer free information without commercial bias.)
- How current is the information? Is a date listed?
- 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?

The old adage still holds true:

"If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

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
- **Extension Foundation** provides access to resources at land-grant universities across the country ■ <https://extension.org/search>
- **Food and Drug Administration** regulates food and drugs, and oversees dietary supplements ■ www.fda.gov
- **Healthfinder** is 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 Service** has many online publications and links to reliable information sources ■ www.ag.ndsu.edu/food