

Health Myths: Telling Fact From Fiction

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, 2009

Do carrots really help your eyesight? Is your eyesight hurt by reading in dim light? Is acne really caused by not washing properly? Does eating at night really make you fatter? If you're like most people, you struggle to tell fact from fiction given all the confusing advice, old wives' tales, and health myths out there.

There are, in fact, so many health myths they would fill up an entire newspaper devoted to exposing them. Not ever likely to have that privilege, what follows is my debunking of just some of the most common myths and old wives' tales.

Does eating carrots lead to 24-carrot eyesight? No, but no need to tell this to your picky vegetable eater! Carrots are wonderfully nutritious, and a good source of Vitamin A, which is important for healthy eyesight, skin, growth, and resisting infection. Eating them, however, does not improve vision. Megadoses of Vitamin A can, in fact, be toxic.

The carrot myth was manufactured during World War II, when Britain's air ministry spread the word that a diet rich in these vegetables helped pilots see Nazi bombers attacking at night. That was a lie intended to cover the real matter of what was underpinning the Royal Air Force's successes: Airborne Interception Radar.

British Intelligence didn't want the Germans to find out about AI, so they created the carrot rumor to give a plausible-sounding explanation for the sudden increase in bombers being shot down.

Does reading in dim light ruin your eyesight? No, though reading in the dark can cause a temporary strain on the eyes that rapidly goes away once you return to normal light. There's no evidence for this myth whatsoever; up until a century ago we were reading by candlelight, and we weren't going blind.

Is acne really caused by dirt and poor hygiene? No, acne is caused by the effects of hormones on sebaceous glands in your skin. Cleaning your face too often can actually increase acne, as the body compensates to replace the body oil washed away!

Nonetheless, gentle cleaning twice daily is still important, as is the need to keep hair trimmed away from the face so that the oil in a pubescent teenager's hair doesn't add to the barrels of oil already on their face.

Does eating at night make you fat? No, so long as what you're eating doesn't put you over your normal daily calorie total. People who eat at night often gain weight not because nocturnal calories are somehow worse, but because the midnight munchies that lead to the refrigerator raids are often in addition to eating three regular meals and snacks during the day.

Does not wearing a hat or proper warm clothing in cold weather cause people to catch a cold? No. Of the hundreds of viruses that cause the common cold, none are spread on the wind. Rather, they are spread person to person, or by way of contaminated surfaces, such as door and faucet handles, countertops, and grocery cart handlebars. To say nothing of that check-out aisle pen used by two hundred people before you the same day.

Is cancer truly unpreventable? No. As many as 50 percent or more of cancer deaths in the United States are caused by social and environmental conditions and unhealthy choices.

The factors that can help prevent cancer include not using cigarettes or other tobacco products, avoiding second-hand smoke, not drinking too much alcohol, maintaining a healthy weight, eating five or more daily servings of fruits and vegetables and a low-fat diet, being physically active, and protecting skin from sunlight.

Are depressed people just people who need to “pull themselves together and they’ll be fine”? No. Depression is an illness involving an imbalance of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters.

Depression is not a character flaw or a sign of personal weakness. You can’t make yourself well by trying to “snap out of it”. Counseling and sometimes medication may be needed. Staying active socially and physically is also important.

Is cholesterol bad for you? Only some types of it. “Good” cholesterol is necessary to build cells and vital hormones. Young children under age two years especially need good forms of cholesterol to help build healthy brain cells.

Good cholesterol is found in nuts, seeds, avocados, and oily fish, and is made in higher quantities by the liver when we exercise. Bad cholesterol, the kind that deposits in your arteries, is found in saturated foods like meat, cheese, cream, butter, and in many processed sweets and snack foods.

Is it true that we only use ten percent of our brains? No. The notion that our brains are not running at full speed simply doesn’t hold up. Advances in brain imaging have shown doctors and researchers that no area of the brain is completely silent or inactive.

Should we really drink at least eight glasses of water a day? No. Most of us get plenty of water through the foods we eat, and the juice, milk, and even caffeinated beverages we drink. Drinking excessive amounts of water can even be dangerous, causing a severe electrolyte imbalance that can cause brain swelling and even death. Bottom line is that if your urine is consistently a nice pale yellow color, you’re getting enough fluids.

Does sugar really make children hyperactive? No. At least, not in the sense that it causes attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, which it does not. Sugar indeed gives us energy, but at least twelve large studies have looked at the effect of sugar on children, and none found evidence for the sugar-equals-hyperactivity myth.

Finally, is it true that we should “feed a cold, starve a fever”? No. This centuries-old saying, popularized by Mark Twain, simply isn’t so. All sick kids and adults – whether they’ve got a cold, a fever, or both – need more nutrients and liquids to get better.