

The 15 Worst Health & Diet Myths

By David Zinczenko

"I don't know what to order," my friend told me over lunch recently. We were sitting in a great new Italian restaurant near my office.

"I know," I replied, scanning the menu. "Everything looks terrific!"

"Yeah, but everything is bad for you!" she exclaimed, practically in tears. "I'm passing on the veal—red meat causes cancer. And the eggplant parmesan—cheese has fat, which gives you high cholesterol. And the bread plate—carbs give you diabetes. I can't eat anything! And I'm really hungry!"

With those kinds of fears, it's a wonder my "health-conscious" friend didn't die of starvation: no protein, and no fat, and no carbs? What's left? Fortunately, as author of *Eat This, Not That!*, I was able to calm her lunch plate panic, and explain that most of what we consider "bad for you" foods aren't bad for you at all—they're just innocent victims of well-intentioned misinformation. A well-balanced diet, combined with some smart choices, is all you need to lose pounds and keep most of our greatest health worries at bay. But many food and [nutrition](#) "myths" persist, confusing our food choices and making weight-loss harder and eating less enjoyable. So relax, and start enjoying food again: Here are 15 food fallacies you can forget for good.

Myth #1: Too much protein hurts your kidneys

Reality: Protein helps burn fat, build muscle, and won't harm your kidneys at all

Way back in 1983, researchers discovered that eating more protein increases the amount of blood your kidneys filter per minute. Many scientists immediately made the leap that a high-protein diet places your kidneys under greater stress. They were proven wrong. Over the past two decades, several studies have found that while protein-rich meals do increase blood flow to the kidneys, this doesn't have an adverse effect on overall kidney function.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Eat your target body weight in grams of protein daily. For example, if you're a chubby 180-pound woman and want to be a lean 160, have 160 grams of protein a day. If you're a 160-pound guy hoping to pack on 20 pounds of muscle, aim for 180 grams each day.

[Bonus Tip:](#) Lose weight fast. Build muscle. Get out of debt. [Whatever your resolution for 2011, here's your plan.](#)



Myth #2: Sweet potatoes are healthier than white potatoes

Reality: They're both healthy!

Sweet potatoes have more fiber and vitamin A, but white potatoes are higher in essential [minerals](#) such as iron, magnesium, and potassium. As for the glycemic index, sweet potatoes are lower on the scale, but baked white potatoes typically aren't eaten without cheese, sour cream, or butter—all toppings that contain fat, which lowers the glycemic index of a meal.

Put the Truth to Work for You: The form in which you consume a potato—for instance, a whole baked potato versus a processed potato that's used to make chips—is more important than the type of spud.

Myth #3: Red meat causes cancer

Reality: Research says enjoy the steak!

In a 1986 study, Japanese researchers discovered cancer developing in rats that were fed "heterocyclic amines," compounds that are generated from overcooking meat under high heat. Since then, some studies of large populations have suggested a potential link between meat and cancer. Yet no study has ever found a direct cause-and-effect relationship between red-meat consumption and cancer. The population studies are far from conclusive. They relied on broad surveys of people's eating habits and health afflictions—numbers that illuminate trends, not causes.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Don't stop grilling. Meat lovers who are worried about the supposed risks of grilled meat don't need to avoid burgers and steak—just trim off the burned or overcooked sections of the meat before eating.

Myth #4: High-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) is more fattening than regular sugar

Reality: They're equally fattening. Beware!

Recent research has show that fructose may cause an increase in weight by interfering with leptin, the hormone that tells us when we're full. But both HFCS and sucrose—better known as table sugar—contain similar amounts of fructose. There's no evidence to show any differences in these two types of sugar. Both will cause weight gain when consumed in excess. The only particular evil regarding HFCS is that it's cheaper, and commonly shows up everywhere from bread to ketchup to soda.



Put the Truth to Work for You: HFCS and regular sugar are empty-calorie carbohydrates that should be consumed in limited amounts. How? By keeping soft drinks, sweetened fruit juices, and prepackaged desserts to a minimum.

Myth #5: Too much salt causes high blood pressure

Reality: Perhaps, but too little potassium causes high blood pressure too

Large-scale scientific reviews have determined there's no reason for people with normal blood pressure to restrict their sodium intake. Now, if you already have high blood pressure, you may be "salt sensitive." As a result, reducing the amount of salt you eat could be helpful. However, people with high blood pressure who don't want to lower their salt intake can simply consume more potassium-containing foods—it's really the balance of the two minerals that matters. In fact, Dutch researchers determined that a low potassium intake has the same impact on your blood pressure as high salt consumption does. And it turns out, the average person consumes 3,100 milligrams (mg) of potassium a day—1,600 mg less than recommended.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Strive for a potassium-rich diet—which you can achieve by eating a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and legumes—and your salt intake won't matter as much. For instance, spinach, broccoli, bananas, white potatoes, and most types of beans each contain more than 400 mg potassium per serving.

Myth #6: Chocolate bars are empty calories

Reality: Dark chocolate is a health food

Cocoa is rich in flavonoids—the same heart-healthy compounds found in red wine and green tea. Its most potent form is dark chocolate. In a recent study, Greek researchers found that consuming dark chocolate containing 100 milligrams (mg) of flavonoids relaxes your blood vessels, improving bloodflow to your heart. And remember: Milk chocolate isn't as rich in flavonoids as dark, so develop a taste for the latter.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Now that you know which "bad" foods aren't actually so awful, you need to know which deceptively dangerous diet-destroying foods to avoid. Check out our must-see slideshow of [25 "Healthy" Foods that Aren't](#).

Myth #7: Gas station snacks are nutritional nightmares

Reality: Even at filling stations, you'll find food that isn't filling

Beef jerky is high in protein and doesn't raise your level of insulin—a hormone that signals your body to store fat. That makes it an ideal between-meals snack, especially when you're trying to lose weight. And while some beef-jerky brands are packed with high-sodium ingredients such as MSG and sodium nitrate, chemical-free products are available.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Sometimes, the service station is a healthier rest stop than a fast food joint. Heck, even pork rinds are better than you'd think: A 1-ounce serving contains zero carbohydrates, 17 grams

(g) of protein, and 9 g fat. That's nine times the protein and less fat than you'll find in a serving of carb-packed potato chips.

Myth #8: Restaurants comply with nutrition disclosure regulations

Reality: Most restaurants would rather load you up with additional cheap calories

Even though many restaurants offer healthy alternatives, you could still be at the whim of the kitchen's cook. A recent E.W. Scripps lab investigation found that "responsible" menu items at chains ranging from Chili's to Taco Bell may have up to twice the calories and eight times the fat published in the restaurants' nutritional information.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Restaurants run from us, but they can't hide. Discover their secrets every day by signing up for [our free Eat This, Not That! newsletter](#) or by [following me right here on Twitter](#), and you'll make 2011 the year of your flatter, toner belly!

Myth #9: Sports drinks are ideal after-workout refreshment

Reality: You need more than that to keep your muscles growing

Carb-loaded drinks like Vitaminwater and Gatorade are a great way to [rehydrate](#) and reenergize; they help replenish glycogen, your body's stored energy. But they don't always supply the amino acids needed for muscle repair. To maximize post-workout recovery, a protein-carb combination—which those drinks may not offer—can help.



Put the Truth to Work for You: After you suck down that sports drink, eat a bowl of 100 percent whole-grain cereal with nonfat milk, suggests a 2009 study in the *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition*. A glass of low-fat chocolate milk is a good choice as well.

Myth #10: You need 38 grams of fiber a day

Reality: More fiber is better, but 38 is nearly impossible

That's the recommendation from the Institute of Medicine. And it's a lot, equaling nine apples or more than a half dozen bowls of instant oatmeal. (Most people eat about 15 grams of fiber daily.) The studies found a correlation between high fiber intake and lower incidence of [heart disease](#). But none of the high-fiber-eating groups in those studies averaged as high as 38 grams, and, in fact, people saw maximum benefits with a daily gram intake averaging from the high 20s to the low 30s.



Put the Truth to Work for You: Just eat sensibly. Favor whole, unprocessed foods. Make sure the carbs you eat are fiber-rich—that means produce, legumes, and whole grains—because they'll help slow the absorption of sugar into your bloodstream.

Myth #11: Saturated fat will clog your heart

Reality: Fat has gotten a bum rap

Most people consider turkey, chicken, and fish healthy, yet think they should avoid red meat—or only choose very lean cuts—since they've always been told that it's high in saturated fat. But a closer look at beef reveals the truth: Almost half of its fat is a monounsaturated fat called oleic acid—the same heart-healthy fat that's found in olive oil. Second, most of the saturated fat in beef actually decreases your heart-disease risk—either by lowering LDL (bad) cholesterol, or by reducing your ratio of total cholesterol to HDL (good) cholesterol.



Put the Truth to Work for You: We're not giving you permission to gorge on butter, bacon, and cheese. No, our point is this: Don't freak out about saturated fat. There's no scientific reason that natural foods containing saturated fat can't, or shouldn't, be part of a healthy diet.

Myth #12: Reduced-fat foods are healthier alternatives

Reality: Less fat often means more sugar

Peanut butter is a representative example for busting this myth. A tub of reduced-fat peanut butter indeed comes with a fraction less fat than the full-fat variety—they're not lying about that. But what the food companies don't tell you is that they've replaced that healthy fat with maltodextrin, a carbohydrate used as a filler in many processed foods. This means you're trading the healthy fat from peanuts for empty carbs, double the sugar, and a savings of a meager 10 calories.



Put the Truth to Work for You: When you're shopping, don't just read the nutritional data. Look at the ingredients list as well. Here's a guideline that never fails: The fewer ingredients, the healthier the food.

Myth #13: Diet soda is better for you

Reality: It may lead to even greater weight gain

Just because diet soda is low in calories doesn't mean it can't lead to weight gain. It may have only 5 or fewer calories per serving, but emerging research suggests that consuming sugary-tasting beverages—even if they're artificially sweetened—may lead to a high preference for sweetness overall. That means sweeter (and more caloric) cereal, bread, dessert—everything. In fact, new research found that people who drink diet soda on a daily basis have an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome.



Put the Truth to Work for You: These days, the world of food is full of nasty surprises like this one, and knowledge is power. Check out *Eat This, Not That! 2011* and *Cook This, Not That!* for the best food, nutrition

and health secrets, and avoid [shocking](#) waistline expanders with our slideshow of [20 Salads Worse Than a Whopper](#).

Myth #14: Skipping meals helps you lose weight

Reality: Skipping meals, especially breakfast, can make you fat

Not eating can mess with your body's ability to control your appetite. And it also destroys willpower, which is just as damaging. If you skip breakfast or a healthy snack, your brain doesn't have the energy to say no to the inevitable chowfest. The consequences can be heavy: In a 2005 study, breakfast eaters were 30 percent less likely to be overweight or [obese](#).



Put the Truth to Work for You: The perfect breakfast? Eggs, bacon, and toast. It's a nice balance of all the nutritional building blocks—protein, fiber, carbs—that will jumpstart your day. The worst? Waffles or pancakes with syrup. All those carbs and sugars are likely to put you into a food [coma](#) by 10 a.m.

Myth #15: You should eat three times a day

Reality: Three meals and two or three snacks is ideal

Most diet plans portray snacking as a failure. But by snacking on the right foods at strategic times, you'll keep your energy levels stoked all day. Spreading six smaller meals across your day operates on the simple principle of satisfaction: Frequent meals tame the slaving beast of hunger.

Put the Truth to Work for You: Make sure each mini meal blends protein and fiber-rich complex carbohydrates, which will sustain the feeling of fullness. Check out our super-handly list of the [best snacks for weight loss](#).