



False claims thrive on Internet

HOW many times in the last month were you conned or approached by a con? Maybe this con took the form of a weight loss product described in an ad in the newspaper. Perhaps it was a too-good-to-be-true TV infomercial that claimed to be backed by science. Or maybe it was a testimonial from a friend who believes what they said.

Even if you didn't take the bait, it seems that the more often you hear or see something that isn't true, the more likely you are to believe it eventually. This is especially so when claims are partial truths couched in scientific jargon.

The Internet is loaded with this type of misinformation. Besides spreading viruses that can confuse or destroy computers, the Internet can spread misinformation which can be as damaging to those seeking the truth. In just a matter of days, contemporary urban legends and outright hoaxes are broadcast all over the world.

These legends are part of a type of folklore that claims to be true. They may be harmless, containing stories that describe humorous scenarios, but many report terrifying happenings.

MANY of these hoaxes are broadcast over email among

friends and acquaintances. They frequently have a sinister or threatening side to them. You want to pass on this information to those you care about. Of course, these things always happened to someone other than the concerned friend passing it along.

Food is the topic of many hoaxes. Here are a few we've come across the last month:

►"Costa Rica bananas have been infected with a flesh eating bacteria. The FDA has been reluctant to issue a country wide warning because of fear of a nationwide panic."

This is completely untrue as is indicated on the Center for Disease Control Web site <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/banana.htm>.

►"Aspartame is the cause of lupus, multiple sclerosis, memory loss, Desert Storm health problems, and obesity."

These claims, said to have been presented at a Conference of the American College of Physicians are untrue. There are hundreds of Web sites on this topic, making it nearly impossible to discern fact from fiction. The most reliable source we could find was Arnold Dias, a respected investigative reporter who actually contacted all of

the claimed sources (<http://www.abcnews.com>).

►"The Mayo Clinic has a weight reducing diet that has been formulated to alter your metabolism so that you literally burn fat. You can lose 20 pounds of fat in 2 weeks."

Untrue. The fact that there is no Mayo Clinic Diet is indicated on the Mayo Clinic Web site at <http://www.mayohealth.org/mayo/9806/htm/mayodiet.htm>.

This legend has been around for decades. The most common version is a very low calorie diet which contains lots of grapefruit, eggs, meat, fish, chicken, spinach, tomatoes, celery and carrots. You will lose weight quickly but most of it is water and muscle, not fat.

Today, we encounter tremendous amounts of information. Because of the difficulty in discerning fact from fiction among the info-overload, there is a strong human tendency to just believe what sounds good.

The next time that you think you're not being given the straight scoop or maybe just want some entertainment, check out <http://www.urbanlegends.about.com>, a Web site dedicated to clearing up hoaxes.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
