



Miracle cures via e-mail are no miracles

Are you being influenced by nutrition misinformation from a well-meaning friend? Sweeping promises of simple cures for complex health problems and "scare e-mails" are freely distributed from friend to friend via e-mail. In many cases, these well-intentioned messages contain only a fraction of truth, making them risky at best.

Misinformation posted on the Internet tends to multiply as people "cut and paste" from one document to another.

One such message, titled "Health Compilation," begins with the heading "Miracle Cure for Anything That Ails You Is as Close as Your Supermarket Shelves," by Susan Jimison. Apparently, several people have added their own brand of health and scare fiction as it moves from friend to friend. More than 50 Web sites are using the "cure" e-mail as an enticement to their sites.

Here are some of the claims and our take on them. Remember, whenever you see the term "miracle cure," you can bet it really is too good to be true.

Claim: Corn flakes are a miracle cure for PMS, reducing depression, anxiety and fatigue.

Our take: Huh? We can think of some cereal companies that would like to know this, but suspect that this miracle cure works only for men with PMS.

Claim: Eating fish or fish oil is a miracle cure for headaches.

Our take: We found one study reporting a reduction in migraine headaches in adolescents taking 2 grams of fish oil each day for two months. But an olive oil placebo capsule was just as effective, so fish oil really isn't a miracle cure.

Claim: Pineapple prevents bone fractures and osteoporosis because it contains manganese.

Our take: The reality is that a variety of trace minerals, including manganese, likely benefit overall bone health. There are also significantly better sources of manganese, including wheat germ, pecans, walnuts and soybeans.

The following claims come in many forms and are part of the growing "Health Compilation" message:

Claim: Coke and Pepsi are good toilet cleaners because of the citric acid in them.

Our take: First, these drinks contain more phosphoric acid than citric acid, and lemon juice has much more citric acid than colas. Lemon-fresh toilets, anyone? The negative focus on colas has become so ridiculous that one Web site suggested that if you mix toilet cleaner and bleach together, you get Coke. Don't try that at home.

Claim: Stop using certain medications because they contain phenylpropanolamine.

Our take: Although the warning about phenylpropanolamine is warranted after a Yale study showed an increased risk of hemorrhagic stroke, the warning is old history. Many medications that once contained the substance have already changed their formulations, so it is important to read label ingredients both at the store and at home.

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