



Variety, balance and moderation still outweigh any fad

This piece marks the 300th bit of health and nutrition advice that we have offered through our weekly "Health Options" column. To celebrate our "300th anniversary," we would like to review topics and issues that we consider the essence of "Health Options" -- taken from the 299 articles published since 1997.

Misinformation

Much of what we have written is aimed at countering common misinformation espoused in the world of health and nutrition. Health is big business, and people will use whatever sales hype works to sell their products and make lots of money. A simple maxim that seems infallible for marketers is that if you repeat something enough, people will start to believe it is true. Infomercials on television are the perfect medium for this repetition.

Examples of ridiculous and unsubstantiated claims are almost unlimited. A classic example was seen a few years ago in the TV marketing of coral calcium supplements. Claims were so ridiculous, exclaiming that almost 100 percent of the calcium was absorbed and that it could cure more than 90 percent of all diseases. Neither claim has even a hint of truth.

The Food and Drug Administration cited about 20 manufacturers for making false

claims. Meanwhile, the barrage of infomercials reshaped popular thinking to the extent that coral calcium supplements were taking a big chunk out of the calcium supplement market.

Despite the lack of scientific support, even reliable brands such as Longs Drug eventually succumbed to carrying their own brand of coral calcium. That's what customers wanted, and Longs needs to satisfy the market to stay in business.

Equally hazardous misinformation is generated by sincere individuals and special-interest groups based on belief or philosophy. We refer to these groups as Mutual Illusion Support Systems (MISS): If lots of people agree on something, together they can decide it is true. The reality is that we tend to fool ourselves based on what fits into our belief structure. If a person is lucky, these belief systems aren't dangerous. But that is not always the case.

When illusion support systems are at their worst, they lead to "infoterrorism" -- the use of misinformation to scare people needlessly. The Internet is loaded with Web sites designed to scare people. Back in 2002 we estimated that about 5,000 Web sites warned about the supposed danger of consuming the artificial sweetener aspartame. There is no reliable evi-

dence to support these claims. Aspartame is one of the most thoroughly studied ingredients in the food supply. Virtually all natural foods contain the two simple chemical components (amino acids) that make up aspartame.

Because there are serious concerns in health and nutrition, it is sad that people waste so much energy on trumping up inconsequential issues. The result of infoterrorism is that people are distracted from real problems that they could easily prevent.

Two such important issues relate to vitamin and mineral deficiencies and excesses. For example, vitamin B-12 deficiency has been described in nutrition and medical journals for years as having devastating consequences for both the individual and their caretaking family. This condition can develop in one out of four people over age 65.

Like Alzheimer's disease, B12 deficiency affects mental, psychological and emotional capabilities. Common symptoms include short-term memory problems, depression and numbness or tingling in the hands or feet. The result is an otherwise healthy adult who requires around-the-clock care.

B12 status can be assessed with a methylmalonic acid blood test. Deficiencies can be treated with monthly B-12 injections. A de-

iciency that progresses undetected destroys the quality of life for both the deficient person and his or her family.

Another vitamin problem is related to excess vitamin A from dietary supplements. Whereas too little vitamin A is a leading cause of blindness in many developing countries, excess vitamin A is also detrimental.

A pregnant woman can seriously increase the risk of birth defects in her offspring by consuming too much vitamin A. Also, only two to three times the recommended intake of vitamin A is associated with increased bone loss and increased bone-fracture risk as people age. We have not found a single Web site fighting to regulate the vitamin A content of dietary supplements.

Mixed messages

Other common health problems can arise from popular health recommendations that are not

meant to be taken to extremes. "Eat more of this and less of that" does not mean "Eat only this and none of that." Surprisingly, eating only "healthy foods," rather than an overall healthy diet, can lead to inadequate protein, excessive fiber and iron deficiency, among other problems.

Similarly, extreme attempts to lose weight can backfire and jeopardize long-term health. It pays off better to focus on maintaining health and developing fitness. Body fat will decline along with long-term maintenance of a healthy weight.

Convenience syndrome

It is so easy to fall victim to a hectic lifestyle and rely too much on a limited variety of foods. The bagel, salad and latte diet won't support an active life for long. Any diet too low in one or more of the 50 or so essential nutrients is sure to eventually take a serious toll on

health.

Staying active

Being too busy to find time for physical activity is certainly as devastating to long-term health as a poor diet. Adequate daily exercise is probably the best way to maintain a healthy weight and healthy heart, and to prevent Type 2 diabetes. Regular exercise also is important for maintaining muscle and a healthy immune system.

Bottom line

The three most important words are variety, balance and moderation. They might not be as sexy as phrases such as low-carb, fat-free, high-protein or six-pack abs. But variety, balance and moderation maximize the odds of meeting the needs for essential nutrients and physical activity required to keep the body and mind strong, fit and flexible.

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