



by James A. Peterson, Ph.D., FACSM

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## Ten Nutrition-Related Myths, Misstatements, and Misunderstandings

**1.** **Taking vitamin C helps prevent colds.** With all due respect to the late Linus Pauling and his widely publicized theory on the relationship between vitamin C and the cold virus, research on the subject has not found that taking vitamin C helps to ward off those unwanted sniffles. On the other hand, studies have shown that vitamin C may (in some instances) slightly shorten the duration of a cold.

**2.** **Consuming more protein builds bigger muscles.** Ingesting additional protein (in whatever form—meat, pills, powder, *etc.*) will not help most individuals develop larger muscles. Your daily protein requirement is based on your body weight. Most individuals meet their needs through food alone. If you eat more protein than what your body needs on any given day, most of the excess will be converted to and stored as fat. As such, exceeding the recommended daily allowance for protein can be, at best, a waste of time and money.

**3.** **2% milk is 98% fat-free.** Not surprisingly, food marketers—in an effort to encourage you to buy their products—often engage in advertising that is misleading. For example, a food label may proclaim that a particular foodstuff is “fat free” to a specific percentage. In the case of 2% milk, the number refers to the relative weight of fat in the product—a factor that is inconsequential and misleading. In reality, what you really want to know with regard to the fat content of milk is the percentage of fat calories in the milk itself. A cup of 2% milk, for example, contains 35% fat calories (42.3 calories of the total 121 calories).

**4.** **Eating low-fat foods will not cause you to gain weight.** Keep in mind that the labels “fat-free” and “low-fat” do not mean no calories. For example, nonfat and low-fat foods could easily be full of sugar and high calories. Controlling your body weight is a by-product of maintaining an appropriate balance between the number of calories you ingest and the number of calories that your body uses. Excessive caloric intake, regardless of whether it comes from “healthy” nonfat or low-fat foods, will promote weight gain.

**5.** **If consuming some of a particular nutrient or food is considered healthy, eating more of that foodstuff will provide even greater benefits.** Your body needs a specific amount of nutrients (carbohydrates, fat, protein, vitamins, minerals, and water) to function properly. Exceeding that level will not give you an extra “boost.” In fact, ingesting too much of some nutrients can be potentially harmful.

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**6.** **Antioxidants can help prevent types of cancer and heart disease.** Eating foods that are relatively rich in antioxidants (*e.g.*, beta carotene and vitamins C and E) or taking antioxidant supplements has not been found to prevent either cancer or heart disease—despite numerous studies that have investigated the matter. To date, no conclusive evidence exists that shows that antioxidants lower the risk of either medical condition.

**7.** **Hamburger is safe to eat if the meat is no longer pink.** When cooking hamburgers, the internal temperature should reach at least 160°F. Truth be known, even when you cook your hamburger to the point when the pink is gone and the juices are clear, eating the burger may put you at risk of contacting an *Escherichia coli* infection. Although the risk is relatively small, the risk is serious (*E. coli* infections, in isolated cases, can lead to death). Using a thermometer to check the internal temperature of your burger while it is being cooked is the surest way to be safe.

**8.** **A high-fiber diet helps prevent colon cancer.** Although consuming a diet high in fiber will decrease the risk of constipation and diverticulitis (among other benefits), a fiber-rich diet has not been found to lower your risk of colon cancer.

**9.** **Foodstuffs that are labeled “natural” or “herbal” are always good for you.** Despite the emotional perception to the contrary, foods can be “natural” or “herbal” and still have negative health consequences. Neither term is a synonym for harmless or non-addictive nor guarantees that a particular food contains the essential nutrients that your body needs. In fact, the opposite may be true. Cocaine and nicotine, for example, are naturally occurring plant by-products.

**10.** **Healthy eating represents the end of appetizing meals.** Eating in a sensible healthy manner does not have to be an exercise where you force yourself to consume poor-tasting food at the expense of mouthwatering delectable alternatives. What it does involve, however, is determining what foods are good for you and learning how to prepare them to “delight” your taste buds. It also entails making good eating habits an integral part of your daily living.

(cut, copy, and distribute to students, clients, and patients)

