

10 Common Food Myths That Dumbfound Nutrition Experts

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Most Americans understand that maintaining good health and longevity requires a balanced diet. However, pervasive food myths and conflicting narratives often cloud the nutrition landscape.

Many food myths have been debunked over time. Below are 10 prevalent misconceptions nutritionists bring up.

Myth No. 1: All Carbs Cause Weight Gain

Many believe carbs are inherently harmful because unhealthy foods are often loaded with them. However, this is an oversimplified view. For instance, both a candy bar and an apple contain around 25 grams of carbs. Yet they have vastly different effects on our health. Apples have been associated with weight loss, while candy bars contribute to weight gain.

“I think people tend to think about this from a two-dimensional, black-and-white perspective, which is why so many people have a hard time finding balance and a middle ground with carbs,” Jenna Volpe, functional nutrition coach and holistic dietitian, told The Epoch Times.

Carbs are not only permissible but also necessary for optimal health, she added. Volpe emphasizes that at the cellular level, our brains and most other cells in the body rely on carbs for energy. Insufficient carb intake prompts the body to break down fat and muscle reserves to produce glucose for the brain, which is not a sustainable long-term solution.

When it comes to consuming carbs, the healthiest options are those produced by nature: fresh fruits and vegetables, potatoes, and unrefined grains like rice, oats, and quinoa, according to Volpe.

Myth No. 2: All Calories Are the Same

The belief that all calories are the same oversimplifies the complexities of food and nutrition.

“There are empty calories and nutrient-dense calories, and many gradations in between,” said Sally Fallon Morell, nutritional researcher and author of the popular nutrition book, “Nurturing Traditions.” Empty calories provide little nutritional value, while nutrient-dense calories are rich in vitamins, minerals, and polyphenols.

Nutrient density refers to the concentration of essential nutrients within a given food or diet. It measures the amount of beneficial nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals, fiber, and protein, relative to the total caloric content of the food.

“The goal is to consume the most nutrient-dense calories possible,” Morell said.

Some highly nutrient-dense foods include organ meats, shellfish, eggs, grass-fed beef, berries, leafy greens, sweet potatoes, and dairy products like milk, cheese, yogurt, and butter.

Myth No. 3: Plant-Based and Nonfat Milk Are Healthier Than Whole Milk

For centuries, humans exclusively consumed whole, full-fat milk. In various cultures, from Kenya to Switzerland, the cream from milk was cherished—not separated. However, in the 20th century, influenced by the belief that all fats were unhealthy, the dairy industry began removing the cream and producing nonfat milk.

This shift in dairy consumption has led to a decrease in essential nutrients since vitamins A, D, E, and K are fat-soluble, according to Morell. “Nonfat milk depletes you of important nutrients,” she added. Therefore, Morell strongly encourages individuals to consume full-fat dairy products.

Additionally, plant-based milk lacks the historical significance and nutrient profile of whole milk. “Whole milk is also more nutrient-dense compared to plant-based milk, making it a better, more complete source of nourishment for nutrients like calcium and protein,” Volpe said.

Volpe pointed out that certain brands of sweetened plant-based milk can contain more added sugar per serving than a candy bar. Individuals who cannot tolerate dairy are recommended to consume full-fat coconut milk.

Myth No. 4: We Can Get All Our Nutritional Needs Met Through Plants

While plants offer a wide range of nutrients and health benefits, they may not provide all the essential nutrients our bodies need. For instance, vitamin B12, crucial for our health, is not naturally present in plant-based foods. Similarly, nutrients like creatine, vitamin D3, and carnosine are primarily found in animal products.

With the increasing popularity of vegan diets, there is growing concern among experts that individuals may not fully recognize the potential health risks associated with excluding meat and animal products from their diets. "As a dietitian concerned about nutrient deficiencies, I strongly advocate for the inclusion of meat and other animal-sourced foods," said Diana Rodgers, a registered dietitian and bestselling author.

Moreover, by including animal foods in our diets, we gain access to critical nutrients such as iron, vitamin A, and calcium, which are also present in plants. However, it is worth noting that our bodies may utilize these nutrients more efficiently when obtained from animal sources. According to Rodgers, the biochemical processes involved in their conversion into usable nutrients are simpler.

Myth No. 5: Vegetable Oils Are Healthier Than Animal Fats

The idea that vegetable oils are healthier than traditional animal fats gained popularity in the mid-20th century, but it's now considered one of the initial nutritional myths that received significant attention.

This promotion of vegetable oils was based on the hypothesis that saturated (animal) fat was the primary cause of heart disease, but recent small clinical trials suggest that this hypothesis may not be accurate. While vegetable oils can lower blood cholesterol, they may not necessarily reduce the risk of coronary heart disease mortalities.

The belief that animal fats are healthier than vegetable oils remains difficult for many to accept, especially since prominent health agencies, including the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans, advise against consuming animal fats.

"Animal fats are essential for health and happiness," Morell said. Animal fats contain essential nutrients such as butyric acid, glycosphingolipids, and soluble vitamins, all of which are necessary for maintaining good health, she added.

On the other hand, vegetable oils have recently come under scientific and nutritional scrutiny. For example, some experts worry that consuming oxidants from heated vegetable oils may pose a greater cancer risk.

Myth No. 6: Eating Red Meat Causes Heart Disease

Initially, researchers hypothesized a potential association between red meat and heart disease. However, recent evidence indicates a more substantial possibility that red meat could contribute to the development of colorectal cancer.

While some reports have indicated an association between red meat consumption and an increased risk of colorectal cancer, it is important to note that these findings demonstrate correlation, not causation.

Research shows that people who eat more red meat also tend to eat more fast food than people who eat less red meat. One must therefore consider this factor before deeming red meat itself carcinogenic.

Furthermore, red meat does not meet all three criteria to be classified as a carcinogen. There is not enough convincing experimental data to prove that the consumption of red meat is directly related to cancer.

Contrary to observational data, which can only establish associations, a clinical trial has not found a direct link between red meat consumption and an elevated risk of colorectal adenoma recurrence. Adenomas, while benign, can turn into cancerous tumors.

"Traditional, nutrient-dense foods like meat are not what's killing us," Rodgers said. "Logically speaking," she added, "it makes very little sense to blame the oldest foods for the newest diseases."

Myth No. 7: All Grains Are Inflammatory

In recent years, there has been a prevailing belief among nutrition experts that grains can trigger chronic inflammation. While there is some truth to this notion, it doesn't provide the complete picture, according to Volpe.

"Grain products made from highly processed flour (like enriched, bleached all-purpose flour) seem to anecdotally have more of a pro-inflammatory effect on the body for certain people," she said. "This may be because processed flour can feed dysbiotic microbes in the gut—which can subsequently induce an inflammatory reaction," she added.

The inflammatory reaction is more commonly observed in refined grains, which have been hybridized and stripped of their beneficial nutrients.

Myth No. 8: Honey Is the Same as Refined Sugar

Despite their initial similarities, extensive research confirms that **honey differs significantly from refined sugar**. For example, refined sugar disrupts metabolism, contributes to weight gain, and potentially promotes cancer cell growth. In contrast, **honey possesses remarkable anti-inflammatory properties that can modulate the immune system, aid digestion, and potentially have anti-cancer effects.**

Although honey has a high sugar content, studies indicate that it may not impact blood glucose levels as severely as white sugar and may even have anti-diabetic properties. Researchers believe that honey's distinct compounds contribute to its divergent effects on sugar metabolism.

The research clearly distinguishes honey from refined sugar. However, individuals with kidney disease or diabetes should treat honey similarly to sugar, according to Volpe's recommendation. Choosing local, unpasteurized honey is advisable, preferably labeled "unheated."

Myth No. 9: Peanut Butter Is a Rich Source of Protein

Food marketers often promote peanut butter as a good source of protein, but experts do not universally agree with this claim. While peanut butter does contain some protein, it is not considered a comprehensive source of protein.

According to Morell and Rodgers, the best protein sources provide a complete profile of amino acids. These include foods like meat, eggs, and milk. Peanut butter, however, lacks certain amino acids, making it an incomplete protein.

Ideally, we should prioritize animal proteins to ensure we're acquiring the optimum ratio of amino acids, Rodgers advised.

Myth No. 10: Natural Flavors Are Harmless

As the fourth most common ingredient in American foods, natural flavors are found in products from boxed cereal to sparkling water to protein powders. These are implemented in food products to intensify flavor and taste. The term "natural" paints this ingredient as harmless or perhaps even beneficial to one's health.

In actuality, "natural flavors" indicate multiple—sometimes over 100—individual ingredients used to formulate a singular "natural flavor." **In some cases, the ingredients used to create natural flavors are not even of natural origin and are linked to serious health consequences such as neurodegenerative diseases.** Unfortunately, consumers are left in the dark when it comes to knowing the exact ingredients used to compose natural flavors, considering that food companies are not required to disclose ingredient lists.

Because of natural flavors' ambiguity, some nutritional and health care professionals caution individuals to limit natural flavor consumption and instead consume foods with known ingredients.