

JANUARY 2012



8
SPECIAL REPORT
Choosing the right fats

2
EDITOR'S NOTE
The importance of flexibility

HEALTH WIRE
Yawning • HPV
• Migraines

3
UP FRONT
Adverse drug events on the rise

6
FOOD SENSE
Coffee or tea?

7
SHAPING UP
Up your flex factor

10
HEALTH-CARE SAVVY
Avoiding a hospital readmission

11
OFFICE VISIT
6 secrets to share with your doctor

12
ON YOUR MIND
Antibiotics and alcohol
• Cutting cholesterol

Health 'truths' overturned

New medical information might change some long-held beliefs.

Medical advice is often subject to change. For instance, a new trial that's more thorough than previous studies might cast doubt on a current practice. Recent research has found that:

- Raising HDL (good) cholesterol with drugs does nothing to protect people against heart attacks, strokes, and early death.

- Routine prostate-cancer screening is less likely to save lives and more likely to lead to substantial harm from subsequent treatment.

- People who receive a brain stent to prevent a second stroke are actually more likely to have another stroke or die sooner compared with those who take medication and make fairly rigorous lifestyle changes.

A medical "reversal" occurs when an existing practice is found to be wrong. "It happens when devices, pills, and procedures come to market before they have been shown to make people live longer or better in well-designed studies," says Vinay Prasad, M.D. a physician in Chicago. He's also

the lead author of a 2011 study, published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, which found that 13 percent of the research articles published in The New England Journal of Medicine in 2009 reported reversals in research findings involving drugs, screening tests, and invasive procedures.

Another review published in the Journal of the American Medical Association looked at studies that found a medical practice was effective. One-third of them were followed by trials that either contradicted the initial findings or found fewer benefits. "It's not uncommon for early research to provide an overoptimistic view of new treatments," says David Tovey, M.D., editor-in-chief of The Cochrane Library, an international research network that evaluates treatment effectiveness.

In other cases, popular health beliefs ultimately prove to be baseless. Highlighted below are familiar practices and assumptions that have recently been revised because of additional research.

[Continued on Page 4]

What you should ask



Unsure about a test or treatment? Ask your doctor the four key questions in this article. While he or she might need time to investigate, the information is worth knowing.

Q: Is this test still recommended?

A: Advice about tests may change. Talk with your doctor and do some research on your own.



Health 'truths' • Continued from page 1

Q: Are there alternate treatments that I should consider?

A: With some disorders, there are no other options, but in other cases, there are alternate treatments. Your doctor should explain them to you.

TAKE MULTIVITAMINS TO IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH

About 40 percent of American adults take multivitamins, even though there's no proof that they prevent chronic diseases or premature death. And two large 2011 studies don't raise additional hope. One of them, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, found no decrease or increase in cardiovascular disease, cancer, or death among multivitamin users. The other study, published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, suggested that multivitamins and other vitamin and mineral supplements, particularly iron, might actually increase the risk of death among older women. Major health organizations that focus on cancer, diabetes, and heart disease advise people to avoid supplements in favor of a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. Consult a doctor about vitamin or mineral use if you've cut calories severely, are a vegan, have a digestive disorder that causes poor absorption of nutrients, or are breast-feeding, pregnant, or trying to become pregnant.

FEED A COLD, STARVE A FEVER?

Or is it starve a cold, feed a fever? "Either way, there's no scientific basis" says Yul D. Ejnes, M.D., an internist in Rhode Island and chairman of the Board of Regents of the American College of Physicians. "With fever, you should certainly be well-hydrated because there's often excessive sweating or gastrointestinal illness that can result in fluid loss. And starving would stress

your body, which is already under stress." For the flu, the American Lung Association emphasizes good nutrition and adequate liquids to speed recovery and prevent dehydration. And for colds, the ALA recommends drinking plenty of water and/or juice to keep the lining of the nose and throat from drying out. Studies have found that chicken soup reduces symptoms by loosening nasal secretions, easing throat soreness, and preventing the inflammatory responses that make cold sufferers feel so rotten.

ALWAYS STRETCH BEFORE AND AFTER EXERCISE

Countering a tradition among exercisers, a study presented at a meeting of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons in 2011 found that stretching before running didn't prevent injuries. Researchers assigned 2,729 runners to either a group that didn't stretch or a group that stretched their calves and thigh muscles. Both groups had the same injury rate, but the risk of getting hurt was higher for runners who were heavier or older, ran more miles, had an injury in the past four months, or switched from their normal pre-run routine—especially those who usually stretched and were asked not to. Two systematic reviews also concluded that stretching before or after exercising didn't reduce muscle soreness or injury. Instead, do a 5-minute warm-up at a fairly easy intensity to increase range of motion and make exercise easier.

BODY MASS INDEX IS BEST FOR DIAGNOSING WEIGHT ISSUES

Obesity is defined as an excess of body fat, which increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. And the BMI, calculated using a person's height and weight, is considered the standard for gauging it. But the index doesn't account for differences in body-fat composition, fitness, gender, race,

or age, and recent research underscores its limitations. In a 2010 meta-analysis involving nearly 32,000 people, published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, the BMI for obesity (30 and above) failed to identify half of the people with excess body fat. The index also doesn't reflect where you carry fat, which is an important factor because people with a lot of fat around the waist are at higher risk for obesity-related diseases. Experts now suggest that combining your BMI with your waist circumference is a better indicator of fitness. A waist measurement greater than 40 inches for men or 35 inches for women indicates an increased risk for obesity-related conditions. (To determine your BMI, multiply your weight in pounds by 703, then divide by your height, in inches, squared. Or use the online calculator at www.ConsumerReportsHealth.org/bmi.)

EVERYONE NEEDS ANNUAL DENTAL X-RAYS

If your teeth are X-rayed as soon as you settle into the dental chair, your dentist isn't in step with current American Dental Association guidelines. To minimize radiation exposure, the ADA advises dentists to examine patients first and then order X-rays if and where they're needed. Bitewing X-rays, directed at specific teeth, for example, are only necessary every two to three years, provided that you don't have gum disease or a tendency to get cavities. And the need for more extensive X-rays should be based on whether you have or are at risk for dental problems. You can get further protection from radiation exposure by requesting a lead apron and

Q: Were people like me included in the research?

A: Don't assume that study results will apply directly to your situation. Some studies, for example, exclude women or older people with more than one medical problem.

thyroid collar, asking if your dentist uses the fastest film (E- or F-speed), and having previous X-rays forwarded to your new dentist if you switch providers.

DRINK AT LEAST 8 GLASSES OF WATER A DAY

This advice persists despite an absence of scientific support. And while you might drink extra water as part of a weight-loss regimen, it's not clear that doing so will help you lose weight. A study found that consuming food with a high water content, like soup, increased the feeling of fullness and reduced hunger, but drinking the same amount of water as a beverage with the same food did not. Some studies suggest that drinking a lot of water might boost metabolism; others suggest it doesn't. Also unsubstantiated is the premise that by the time you're thirsty, you're already dehydrated. The Institute of Medicine reports that most healthy people get the water they need by letting their thirst guide them and by consuming it through various sources, including other liquids and food.

KNUCKLE-CRACKING LEADS TO ARTHRITIS

Many people believe this habit leads to osteoarthritis of the hand. But there's no connection, according to a 2011 study published in the *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*. Researchers reviewed hand X-rays of 215 people ages 50 to 89 and questioned them about knuckle-cracking. The prevalence of osteoarthritis was about the same among those who cracked their joints and those who didn't. That's consistent with a 1990 study in which researchers found hand osteoarthritis in about 16 percent of knuckle-crackers and abstainers alike. But those with the habit were more likely to have hand swelling and a reduced grip strength, so it's best to stop. Also noteworthy: A study found that many knuckle-crackers frequently bit their nails, smoked, or drank alcohol.

EVERYONE NEEDS A YEARLY PHYSICAL EXAM

There's little high-quality evidence that having an annual checkup can keep you

Q: Will this test change the way you treat my condition? If not, what is the benefit of doing it?

A: Diagnostic tests are generally necessary only if the results help guide treatment decisions.

healthy. In 2011, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommended that most people skip two standard components of the routine checkup: the prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test for healthy men, and electrocardiogram screening to detect heart disease in people without symptoms. "The traditional head-to-toe exam accompanied by a battery of tests hasn't been shown to improve health," Ejnes says. "And broadly screening for things one has no reason to suspect—such as anemia, kidney disease, and liver disease—can lead to harm." Instead talk to your doctor about how often you need a wellness checkup, blood pressure monitoring, and cholesterol testing. ■

Food lore: Gospel or phony baloney?

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Some evidence suggests it might. For example, a 2011 Dutch study involving more than 20,000 people found that stroke risk was 52 percent lower among those with a high intake of fruit and vegetables whose edible portion is white. Apples and pears were the most commonly consumed "white" produce.



grains, flour, and oils. Cows that produce organic milk cannot exceed a specified minimum intake of pesticides or be treated with hormones or antibiotics. We have advised that it's worth paying more for organic apples, peaches, spinach, milk, and beef to avoid chemicals found in the conventionally produced versions of those items.

Eggs are bad for your cholesterol level. More worrisome are saturated fats—found in meat and full-fat dairy products—and trans fats that lurk in some margarines, fast food, and baked goods. People with normal levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol who restrict those fats can safely eat up to seven eggs a week; those with high LDL should limit themselves to four, or use egg whites.

Warm milk helps you sleep. Milk and other proteins contain tryptophan, an amino acid that causes drowsiness. Eating carbohydrate-rich foods makes tryptophan more available to the brain. That's why the National Sleep Foundation recommends bedtime snacks consisting of both a carbohydrate and a protein, such as cereal with milk, peanut butter on toast, cheese and crackers, or even a turkey sandwich.

Buy organic. That depends. Skinless or soft-skinned produce such as nectarines and sweet bell peppers, and many imported fruit and vegetables, tend to harbor high pesticide residues when grown conventionally. But produce whose skins or peels aren't eaten—such as bananas, citrus fruit, onions, and pineapple—pose a low pesticide risk for consumers, as does meat, poultry,

Eating carrots improves your eyesight. Carrots are a major source of vitamin A, which promotes good vision, especially in low light. But most Americans get sufficient amounts of the vitamin, which is best consumed through a variety of bright yellow, orange, and dark green fruit and vegetables. It's also plentiful in milk, cheese, eggs, liver, and fortified cereals.