

◆ FEATURE



THE TRUTH ABOUT FOOD

We look at five common food beliefs, and discover
whether or not they are true.

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We've all heard the old adage, "you are what you eat". Putting aside the question of why we still look like apes even though most of us don't actually make a habit of eating monkey, there is some truth to the statement: what we put into our bodies can dramatically affect both our short- and long-term health prospects.

But for every true story we hear about food, we hear another that sounds suspiciously like a nutritional myth. So we decided to assess five food questions with the help of Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants.

1 Is drinking seven to eight cups of water per day actually necessary or good for you?

Water constitutes about 60 per cent of an adult's body weight and is required for life-sustaining reactions, some of which include carrying nutrients and waste products in and out of the body, participating in chemical reactions, acting as a lubricant to cushion joints, maintaining normal body temperature and blood pressure, and so on. It is not too much to say that water is probably one of the most important elements in the human body, and one that we absolutely cannot live without.

So yes, it is true that it is both necessary and good for you to have about two litres of water (about eight cups of water, at an average of 236ml per cup) a day. If you perspire more due to exercise, you will need to increase your fluid intake. Soft drinks and alcohol are both not appropriate substitutes for water; in fact, they often act as diuretics, causing you to actually lose more water!

You can often find that you can solve many seemingly chronic problems just by drinking enough water every day. Headaches, fatigue, joint pain, dizziness and many other ailments are often just your body's way of telling you that you do not have enough water.

2 Does eating more protein than carbohydrates help you lose weight?

Definitely not. Too much protein in your diet strains your kidney, causing water loss which is often mistaken for fat loss. This can often lead to short term weight loss but is, in the long term, actually extremely unhealthy.

Protein and carbohydrates both provide four calories per gram. Weight gain or loss occurs when there is an imbalance of calories. Since both nutrients have the same amount of calories per weight, it will technically not make a difference where the calories come from. However, a successful weight loss diet contains the right proportions of carbohydrate and protein for optimal hormonal balance to suppress appetite and control cravings.

Ideally, carbohydrate is required in a slightly larger amount than protein for a nutritious weight loss diet. This will ensure that you will not feel hungry later on in the day and resort to snacking, which is often worse off for your weight-loss regime than almost anything else.





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3 Is eating fat really bad for your body?

Fat is actually an essential part of your body, serving as a backup energy reserve, storage for fat-soluble vitamins (such as vitamin A, D, E and K), cushioning for your organs and keeping you warm when it gets too cold outside. It only becomes a problem when you have too much fat, a medical condition known as obesity.

Fat in your food does not necessarily translate to fat in your body. Virtually every ounce of nutritional energy you get from your food – fat included – gets *converted into energy for your body; and if you have too much energy that is not burnt away through exercise, that energy is turned into body fat.*

Food fat, compared to other types of food, is very energy-dense. This means that, if there is a lot of fat in your diet, you can eat a lot, energy-wise, and still not be full due to the lack of volume. As long as you watch the amount of calories you're actually eating every day, having some fat in your diet may not necessarily be a bad thing.

4 Is there a relationship between food cholesterol and blood cholesterol?

The modern man, in general, does not need to have a minimum amount of cholesterol in his diet: our livers produce a significant amount of cholesterol for our bodies' use, and the rest can be naturally acquired through a normal diet.

The inverse, however, is not true. Eating too much food that is high in cholesterol can increase the amount of cholesterol in our blood if the excess is not removed efficiently. Individuals with this rare difficulty often experience the buildup of plaque in their bodies which, eventually, will lead to atherosclerosis, or the hardening of one's arteries. For most people, however, our bodies are fairly efficient at bleeding off this excess cholesterol in our food.

But the true cause of high blood cholesterol is really the consumption of saturated fat, which has been proven to increase the total amount of blood cholesterol in your body. Watch out for products which say "no cholesterol": if they are high in saturated fat but have 0% cholesterol, it is actually worse for you!

While we're on the topic, it's worth pointing out that there is no good and bad cholesterol in food, though there is in blood. Cholesterol is only differentiated into the so-called "good" (high-density lipids, or HDL) and "bad" (low-density lipids, or LDL) cholesterol in your body.

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Are high concentrations of antioxidants in food good for you?

The media has, in recent years, made free radicals out to be some sort of monster that destroys anything and everything in its path. With a name that evokes images of terrorism and guerrilla jungle fighting, it is unsurprising that it has become one of the greatest boogiemens in the health world. But what exactly are they?

Simply put, free radicals are atoms with an unpaired electron that can cause destructive changes within the body. Created as a byproduct of the oxygenation process, they can sometimes lead to cancers, heart disease and - most frighteningly of all - the formation of wrinkles.

Antioxidants, on the other hand, protect our body cells from free radical damage by donating electrons to free radicals, minimising the amount of harm they can cause. While we need good amounts of antioxidants if we want to be protected against free radical damage, we should get them from whole and natural foods such as fresh fruit, vegetables and wholegrains. By sticking to the recommended portion of two servings of fruit and vegetables each and one to two servings of wholegrains a day, we will have more than enough antioxidants to keep the free radicals away.

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