# Contradictory nutrition news creates consumer confusion

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Exposure to conflicting news about the health benefits of certain foods, vitamins and supplements often results in confusion and backlash against nutrition recommendations, finds a recent study in the *Journal of Health Communication*: International Perspectives.

This confusion and backlash may make people more likely to ignore not only the contradictory information, but also widely accepted nutritional advice such as eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and exercising regularly, said Rebekah Nagler, Ph.D., assistant professor in University of Minnesota's School of Journalism and Mass Communication in Minneapolis and author of the study.

Nagler analyzed responses collected from 631 adults who took part in the Annenberg  National Health Communication Survey in 2010. Participants were asked how much conflicting or contradictory information they heard from the media, including newspapers, television, radio, and the internet about four specific nutritional topics: red wine or other alcohol; fish; coffee; and vitamins or other supplements.

More than 71 percent of people surveyed said that they heard moderate or high levels of contradictory information about nutrition. Those with the greatest exposure to contradictory information expressed the most confusion about nutrition. Greater confusion was associated indirectly with backlash against nutritional advice in general, as indicated by agreement with statements such as "Dietary recommendations should be taken with a grain of salt," or "Scientists really don't know what foods are good for you". This was true even when controlling for age, education or level of general mistrust. Confusion and backlash were also slightly associated with less intention to exercise or eat fruits and vegetables.

Many people get health information from the news media, which may not make it clear that research is constantly evolving. In addition, different research institutes may produce conflicting results on similar topics or produce results on related topics that are at cross purposes, such as finding that fish containing oils that are good for your heart may be contaminated with mercury, which is bad for you, Nagler explained.

"Can the public deal with [these messages]? Can they make sense of what they are seeing?" Nagler wondered. The fault may not lie solely with journalists for not doing a good job of explaining the research since the media landscape is changing as newspapers shrink and as social media such as blogs and Facebook grow in influence, she added.

"The author points out that there is an association at work here," said Ivan Oransky, M.D., vice president and global editorial director at MedPage Today and vice president of the Association of Health Care Journalists. The study notes that people who are confused about nutrition in the first place may blame the media for their confusion, he pointed out.

Journalists should try to avoid relying on information based on findings from a single nutrition or health study and instead report on findings from groups of studies, Oransky said. If journalists do report on a single study, they need to put the information in context, he added.

**More information:** Nagler, R. "Adverse outcomes associated with media exposure to contradictory nutrition messages." *J Health Comm*. 19:1,24-40, DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2013.798384

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