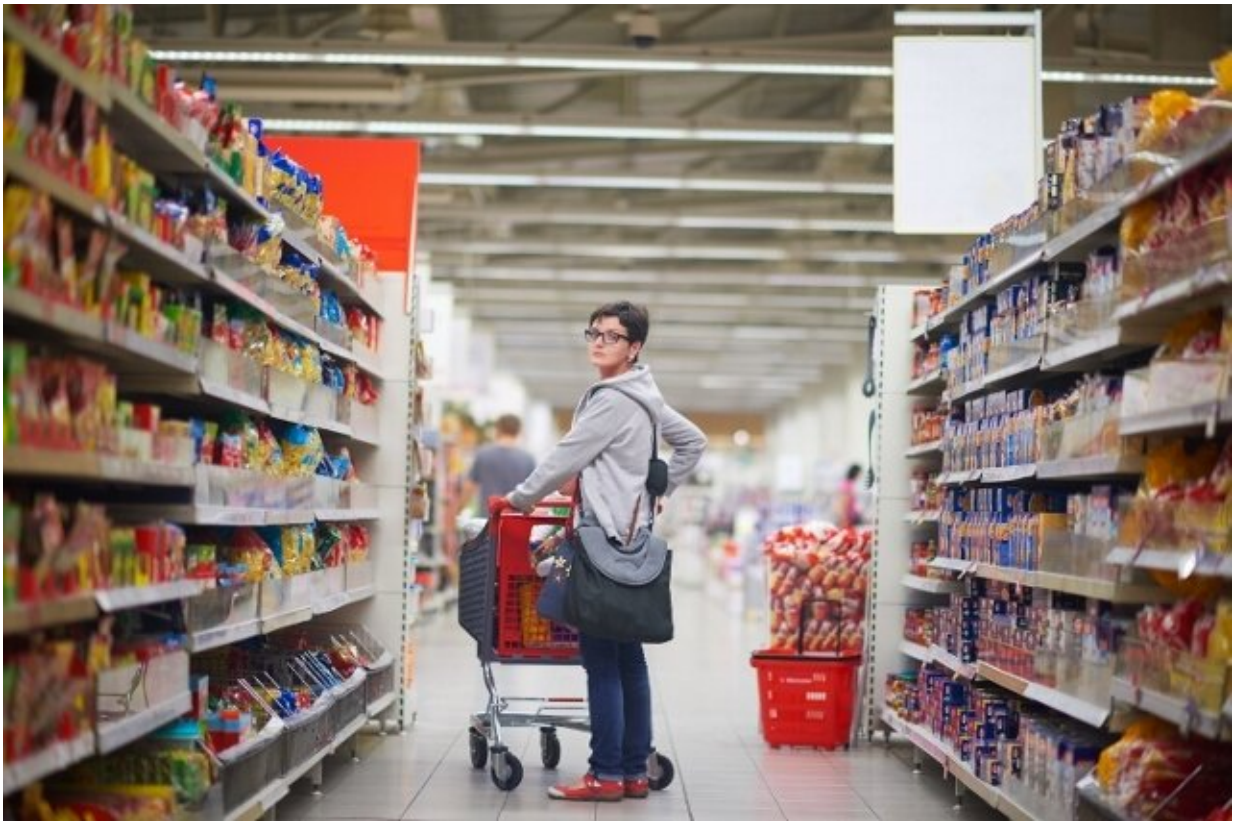


Expert offers tips about online nutrition information

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Any article that claims dramatic health benefits from a single nutrient, food, or practice, is almost always not to be trusted. "If it sounds too good to be true, it's very, very unlikely that it is true," Jeanne Goldberg said. Credit: Ingimage

In today's social media world, it's easier than ever to find "facts"—and increasingly difficult to figure out which of them are actually true.

Reporting based on findings of nutrition research, in particular, is rife with exaggerations, contradictions, and flat-out inaccuracies. Many people end up making food decisions based on this flawed advice, instead of following tried-and-true guidelines.

Bad [nutrition](#) advice is nothing new. Food fads and misinformation go back centuries in the U.S., said Jeanne Goldberg, A59, N86, professor emerita of Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, who teaches a course called Communications Strategies in Nutrition and Health Promotion.

"The [science](#) that underlies sound nutrition advice is in constant evolution," Goldberg said. "For decades, [nutrition information](#) that gets generated by the scientific community gets translated to the public forum before it's ready for public consumption."

Popular interest in nutrition and its role in [health promotion](#) has been increasing, particularly since the 1960s, when people started recognizing the strong relationship between diet and the prevention of chronic disease. More recently, the easy platform provided through digital publishing has also caused an uptick in a certain brand of freedom of the press. "Anyone is free to write anything they want and are not necessarily constrained by the truth," Goldberg said. "And if you're an effective communicator, you can get people's attention."

The way the media work sometimes compounds the problem. Compared to earlier times when many journalists had science backgrounds, in the current media environment, more journalists are generalists. Goldberg pointed out that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* still tend to have science writers, but smaller newspapers may not have this kind of expertise. Writers without science backgrounds can oversimplify complex research, and editors may further confuse things. "Always keep in mind that headlines and articles are often written by two different

people," Goldberg said, "and the person who writes the headline doesn't always understand the content of the article."

It's also true that not all scientists are facile at communicating with journalists, Goldberg added. In her course, she prepares future nutrition professionals to translate sometimes complex science into language that a whole range of audiences can understand. "The fundamental point in the class is to teach students to take their understanding of the science of nutrition and communicate accurate, understandable, and actionable information to a range of audiences," she said.

As for consumers, how does the average reader without a science background sort through all the noise? Goldberg offered six guidelines to separate good information from bad, find sources to trust, and make well-informed decisions about your health.

- Listen to authoritative sources. Goldberg offered some solid nutrition information sources: the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion's [MyPlate nutrition guide](#), for example, as well as [MyPlate for Older Adults](#), developed by scientists at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center at Aging at Tufts with support from the AARP Foundation. Other good sources include the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#), the [American Heart Association](#), the [American Diabetes Association](#), and, of course, the [Tufts Health & Nutrition Letter](#). "These are some good, consistent sources of accurate nutrition information, with an expert advisory board that reviews complicated material in their area of expertise and puts it into actionable language that people can use," Goldberg said.
- Beware the silver bullet. Any article that claims dramatic health benefits from a single nutrient, food, or practice, is almost always not to be trusted. "Except in extreme cases, if it sounds too good to be true, it's very, very unlikely that it is true," Goldberg said.

She cautioned that people are more willing to accept information that is compatible with what they'd really like to do. "People want to hear certain things, and they don't want to hear other things."

- Seek additional context. Any claim based on a single study, especially one that flies in the face of other evidence, is likely not a reliable basis for making big decisions about the food you eat. For example, one study indicating you should strictly limit your intake of fish shouldn't outweigh the many science-based reasons that show fish are a healthy choice. "Nutrition science is an iterative process. It is not a science of single studies and breakthroughs," Goldberg said. "Good information is always provided in a context, and you always want to look for that context."
- Evaluate the original research. It sounds simple, but people often mistake something that seems plausible for something with actual research behind it, Goldberg said. For example, she pointed to the wrongheaded advice to consume gelatin to strengthen your fingernails. "The basis of this claim is that gelatin is rich in protein," she said. "Well, it is, but it is not high-quality protein. The science doesn't match the claim."
- Look at the researcher. It's important to examine the source of your information, said Goldberg, pointing out that not everyone who talks about nutrition is a nutrition scientist. "One thing you can look for is people with true research expertise in their field," she said. "If a story is quoting someone who is from a famous university but has no presence in the world of nutrition research, I would worry about that a little."
- Focus on the basics. In the end, most of your daily food decisions should come down to personal taste and the kind of sound science reflected in sources such as MyPlate, Goldberg said—not on the latest studies to come down the pike. "All this stuff you read in the media is on the fringes of what drives the selection of

foods for a healthy diet," Goldberg said. When in doubt, she advised returning to the same mental checklist: Do you eat plenty of fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables? Do you limit your intake of salty food? Do you consume mostly whole grain breads and cereals, mostly lean meat, and mostly low-fat dairy products? "In other words," Goldberg said, "if you're eating a balanced diet according to what's laid out on MyPlate, you're doing pretty well."

Provided by Tufts University

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