



BELIEVE IT OR *NOT*?

**The headlines that are
bad for your health**

Fed up with the daily dose of health scare stories in your newsfeed? We asked the experts to clear up what's true and what's false, based on hard fact

MYTH
1

Detox is a must

AS MANY OF US get ready to shape up for summer, social media is awash with talk of detoxing. The idea is to 'flush out' toxins by radically changing our diet for a short period, by avoiding alcohol, coffee, sugar, meat, processed foods and entire food groups such as carbs and dairy. The result: you eat more fruit and veg, drink a lot more water and, allegedly, benefit from clearer skin, better digestion, improved immunity, more energy - and weight loss.

Yes, paying more attention to eating healthily (by upping your fruit and veg intake, for example) is important. But the truth is our bodies don't actually need any help to detox. 'Provided you're healthy and your body is functioning normally, it's the job of your liver and kidneys to excrete toxins,' says HFG nutrition consultant Juliette Kellow. 'If these organs are working well, there's absolutely no need to embark on a detox. If they aren't, you need to see a doctor immediately.'

Juliette agrees, however, that some aspects of a detox regime can be positive, such as reducing your intake of processed foods, sugar, fat, alcohol and caffeine. Plus, drinking plenty of water is necessary to keep us hydrated.

On the downside, most detox diets recommend cutting out a wide range of foods. This means nutrients and calories can be in short supply, leaving us at risk of deficiencies in the long run and a lack of fuel to function properly in the short term. 'People claim the side effects of detoxing, such as headaches, nausea, irritability and light-headedness are due to toxins leaving the body,' explains Juliette. 'They're more likely to be the body's response to being very, very hungry and needing to create some energy to function.' →

ADVICE ABOUT EVERY ASPECT OF OUR HEALTH and nutrition is never more than the click of a mouse or the swipe of a smartphone away.

These days, it can feel as though we're simply taking in too much information, as self-professed 'nutritionists', bloggers and well-meaning friends flood our screens and social media feeds with everything from their take on fashionable new diets to the healthiest snack to offer our kids.

Before absorbing all this as gospel, it's worth stopping to remember that some bloggers with a book to sell or companies with a product to promote may put health 'facts' out there that simply aren't facts at all. Then there are the newspaper and online editors looking for hard-hitting headlines to grab readers' attention. Before you know it, health myths are formed, shared instantly across the worldwide web - and are universally accepted as the truth.

At HFG, we relay information originated by experts and backed up by science. So we thought it was time to put some of the most prevalent current health myths under scrutiny to see what, if any, grains of truth they contain.



Thinking more carefully about **WHAT YOU EAT AND DRINK** makes sense...
Detoxing doesn't



MYTH 2

Superfoods are superior

EVERY YEAR THE MEDIA announce one or two new 'superfoods' - ingredients that are meant to possess extra-special, health-boosting properties. In the past, these have included exotics such as goji berries and chia seeds, fruits such as pomegranates and blueberries, and home-grown veg such as broccoli and kale. This year's winner is the humble cauliflower. So is it worth adapting our shopping lists to add the latest healthy superstar ingredient?

Juliette reminds us that labelling something as a superfood is more about marketing than science. 'Say you've got a product that's selling well in South America and you want to bring it to the UK market. How are you going to get it noticed? Well, if it's got a good range of nutrients or exceptional amounts of one specific vitamin or mineral, promote it as a "superfood" and it will get media coverage.'

That's not to say some of these foods don't contain useful nutrients. But often, notes Juliette, the lauded health claims of a superfood - such as being good for your heart, great for skin or having 'cleansing' properties - aren't backed up by quality research, if indeed any at all. Studies may be carried



'We love the humble CAULI, but it's only one part of a 'super diet''

out on only a small number of people, for example, so the results can't be taken seriously. 'Fortunately, labelling guidelines have been tightened across the EU in the past few years, which means the term "superfood" tends not to be used on packaging any more. However, it's still a buzz word in the media and online,' says Juliette.

'The best thing to remember is that there is no such thing as a superfood - just a super diet. If this is what you're aiming for, make sure you're eating a wide range of foods from the four main food groups, fill up on at least five portions of fruit and veg a day, choose wholegrains over refined carbs, and eat two portions of fish a week, one of which should be oil-rich.'

MYTH 3

Sugar is a killer!

OVER THE PAST YEAR, sugar seems to have overtaken fat as the media's Public Health Enemy Number One. MPs and pressure groups are demanding food manufacturers cut back on it, while every week more celebrities quit sugar and are urging us to do the same in self-penned glossy cookbooks. Davina McCall is just one of the latest celebs to join the anti-sugar campaign.

Spend a few minutes on the internet and you'll find claims that sugar causes everything from obesity to cancer, with some experts saying it's as hazardous for our health as smoking. Really?

Leading dietitian Laura Clark sets the record straight. 'Sugars are found in many forms, some of which are naturally occurring, some of which are added to foods,' she explains. 'If it's a naturally occurring form, such as fructose in fruit or lactose in milk, it will usually be accompanied by other nutrients. For instance, fruit contains vitamins and soluble fibre, while dairy products contain protein and calcium.' The problem comes when we eat



'In the WORLD OF SUGAR, not all foods are equal'

large amounts of food featuring a lot of *added* sugar. Doughnuts, biscuits, puddings and cakes, for example, come with few, if any, compensating nutrients to accompany the sugar. Instead, they come with a lot of fat, mainly saturated in a lot of cases. And this combo of sugar and fat means these foods tend to be loaded with calories.

'Clearly, if we're taking in more calories than we need, it puts us at an increased risk of weight gain and those conditions associated with weight gain, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease,' says Laura.

In other words, it's not sugar itself that will kill us - but an excessive intake of calories.

**MYTH
4**

Butter is better

RECENT HEALTH BLOGS and high profile news reports maintain that butter is now a smarter choice for your toast than spread or margarine. The argument is that butter is more natural and that the level of saturated fat isn't as harmful as the additives in other spreads.

Laura says this idea about butter being a more 'natural' choice has come about because margarine producers have taken a while to get the ingredients right. 'The large manufacturers' recipes have evolved over the years. At first, to make margarine solid at room temperature, they used hydrogenated fats. Then it became apparent that these hydrogenated fats turned into trans fats during cooking, which were found to be as bad for our health as saturated fats.'

Fortunately, manufacturers responded to concerns about their products by removing all hydrogenated fats from the spreads to avoid harmful trans fats being formed. These days all margarines and spreads available in the UK are free from these ingredients.

Meanwhile, many health experts agree that the recent headlines suggesting we no longer need to worry about saturated fat have been greatly exaggerated. Despite what the headlines may have led us to believe, there's been no official change in advice. Health policy in the UK remains the same and continues to recommend a reduction in saturated fat to help keep our hearts healthy.

At the same time, major UK health agencies, such as the British Heart Foundation and NHS Choices, continue to

recommend swapping saturates for small amounts of unsaturated fat such as polyunsaturates or monounsaturates. And many spreads tend to fit this bill as they are mostly made from unsaturated vegetable oils such as olive, sunflower or rapeseed.

Whether you prefer butter or margarine on your crumpets, Juliette's advice is to consume small amounts only, and that goes for the low-fat versions, too. 'All types of spread provide calories and it's an excess of calories that makes us gain weight or struggle to lose it if we need to,' she says. 'There's unequivocal proof that being overweight or obese is a major contributor to many of the UK's biggest killers such as heart disease, stroke and cancer. That, in my mind, provides the best argument for cutting down on all spreads, whether it's butter or marg.' →



Official health advice on **SATURATED FAT** remains to limit our intake



**MYTH
5**

Bread is bad

BANNING BREAD is a hangover from the days when the Atkins diet was hitting headlines and carbs were the enemy. But Juliette says there's really no good health reason for this.

'As a general rule, bread itself tends to be low in fat and supplies our body with energy, which is especially important when we're exercising. And it isn't the calorie-fright many of us think it is - one slice contains around 80kcal,' she says. It's also a misconception that bread causes bloating.

'A recent review by the British Nutrition Foundation failed to find a link between eating bread regularly and bloating or abdominal discomfort.'

Instead of worrying about the bread itself, it's really more important to watch what we put with it. For instance, smothering it in butter, chocolate spread or jam, or piling in mayo-laden fillings will seriously increase calories, fat, sugar and/or salt.

That's not to say we shouldn't control the amount of bread we eat. 'We can rely on it too much,' says Juliette. 'Toast in the morning, sandwiches for lunch and bread with our evening meal can contribute to an excess of calories and also push up our salt intakes. A typical slice tends to have around



With only 80kcal, this SLICE OF BREAD is a low-fat way to get energy and fibre

0.4g salt - so six slices contain 40% of our maximum daily salt quota before we even put anything else with them.'

Juliette recommends mixing up your carbs, instead of having bread with every meal. 'If you eat a lot of it and need to lose weight, it makes sense to cut back. If your weight is healthy, try a variety of carb-based foods to add different nutrients - brown basmati rice, wholewheat pasta, jacket potatoes, wholegrain breakfast cereals, couscous, quinoa, teff and bulgur wheat are all lower-salt choices than bread.' And, says Juliette, when you do eat it, choose wholegrain over white. 'Studies show that people who eat more wholegrains find it easier to control their weight and tend to have a lower risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes than those who eat less.'

WORDS: MATT CHITTOCK. PHOTOS: GETTY, THINKSTOCK

Google isn't the source of all knowledge

WHEN WE'VE GOT A HEALTH OR NUTRITION QUERY the first thing many of us do is go online. The problem is that the answers we find may not do us any good - the internet is awash with conflicting information about health issues, with no censorship to weed out what's wrong or scary. From tall tales of how lemon juice can cure cancer, to the 'facts' on whisky's health benefits, there's a lot of misleading information out there. And as search engines rank results by popularity, rather than accuracy, the truth is hard to find.

Juliette says use your common sense: 'First, ask yourself if a doctor or dietitian would back up the online advice. If you

The truth is hard to find: search engines rank results by popularity, rather than accuracy

think about it, it's unlikely your GP would tell you to drink more whisky!' It can be hard to check if the writer of an online piece is properly qualified as anyone can call themselves a nutrition or diet 'expert' with no training at all. 'Even the term "doctor" is no guarantee they're medically qualified,' says Juliette.

However, if a piece of information has been written by a registered dietitian (RD), you're in safer hands. If in any doubt, though, for any health concerns, Juliette says that the best advice comes from your GP - and, if you're still confused over diet or nutrition issues, book an appointment with an RD.