

The WORST health and nutrition stories of 2015



At year's end, I customarily review the top podcasts and stories of the past year.

This year, I've decided to inaugurate a new tradition. In the spirit of Worst Fashion Trends, the Darwin Awards (for stupidest ways of dying), and Rotten Tomato movies, I'm hereby offering my take on the Worst Health and Nutrition Stories of 2015.

Among my selections you'll find unfounded conclusions, jumping the shark, unmitigated bias, and sheer idiocy.



The problem is that there are so many venues these days for publishing health and medical stories, and so much competition to capture eyeballs. As a result, we're constantly bombarded with junk journalism. In some cases, the writers have a meager understanding of science; in others, they're pushing a thinly-veiled agenda.

Here are my nominations for the Worst Health and Nutrition Stories of 2015:

A test that will tell you how near you are to death: Lurid headlines in a British tabloid proclaim “The spit test that can predict how long you will live: Levels of an antibody in the body fall the nearer a person gets to death.”

Snared by this click-bait, I read on. The test is based on saliva levels of IgA, a protective immunoglobulin that invariably declines with age.

Trouble is, as a clinician I regularly test for salivary IgA. And I find that even many young patients have low IgA, which may render them more susceptible to infections, but doesn't necessarily doom them to an early death.

So, while salivary IgA is roughly associated with aging, there are lots of other “death-predicting” tests. Why not use the time needed to complete a 50 yard dash? Or the amount of weight you can curl? How far you can put an 8 pound shot? Or whether you can remember the names of all the Cartwright brothers on “Bonanza” (that'll REALLY date you!).

In short, arbitrary and absurd. A non-story.

Best Diets Overall: U.S. News and World Report (who reads that anymore?) Wellness section rated and ranked 38 popular diets. Their experts' bias is clearly indicated by the fact that the Paleo Diet is #37 of 38; the popular Whole30 Diet, which I'm test-driving this month is rated dead last.

“No independent research.” “Nonsensical claims.” “Extreme.” “Restrictive.” The slams against the Whole 30 came in strong from our panelists, who tied it with Atkins and the Raw Food Diet as the worst of the worst for healthy eating,” sniffs U.S. News. Where have they been in 2015 with all the new evidence vindicating low-carb diets, and exonerating dietary fat and cholesterol?

What DO they rate highly? The low-fat DASH Diet, endorsed by the American Heart Association, based largely on whole grains

and starches, plentiful fruits and vegetables, drastically restricting sodium, cholesterol, animal protein and saturated fat. So 1980s!

Ben Carson must be crazy to recommend supplements for cancer:

The American Council for Science and Health (a wholly-owned subsidiary of BigPharma, agri-business, and the chemical industry) attacks Ben Carson for his endorsement of Mannatech, a supplement company. While Carson's commercial ties may reflect questionable political acumen, the ACSH's supplement-bashing agenda is clearly revealed by this whopper:

"We have expressed our disdain for 'dietary-nutritional supplements' on numerous occasions. But for a potential presidential nominee from a major political party to embark on a regimen of supplements as a form of prostate cancer treatment, that is astoundingly bad judgment."

Wow. The implication is that it's sheer quackery to even suggest (based on considerable scientific evidence) that supplements might play a role in cancer prevention or treatment. I guess, by that criterion, I could never run for president. I list 20 supplements that men with prostate cancer should know about here.

Blaming 'anti-vaxxers' for the measles recurrence: Paul Offit, known for his virulent anti-alternative medicine views, continues his jihad against vaccine "refuseniks."

Ignoring evidence suggesting that other factors might be involved in the current uptick in measles cases—e.g., lack of efficacy of the vaccine, unrestricted immigration, abysmal diets—Offit presses for legislation mandating compulsory immunization. The irony is that American citizens who have legitimate concerns about vaccines are denied choice, while prisoners at Guantanamo are entitled to pro bono legal representation when they refuse shots.

Meat is "bad for the environment": Vegetarian Times repeats

the discredited shibboleth that raising animals for food produces environmental devastation, is energy-inefficient, and leaves a large carbon footprint.

But what of the organic arugula that arrives fresh at your Detroit store shelf in February? Or the Guatemalan raspberries? Or fresh oranges and grapefruit from the Sun Belt? All these require massive amounts of jet fuel and gasoline for transport, huge water resources, and tons of fertilizer, not to mention the pesticides and herbicides involved in production.

But a new study suggests that, while we can debate the merits of vegetarianism, reduced environmental impact may not be one of them.

“Eating lettuce is over three times worse in greenhouse gas emissions than eating bacon,” said Paul Fischbeck, one of the researchers. “Lots of common vegetables require more resources per calorie than you would think. Eggplant, celery and cucumbers look particularly bad when compared to pork or chicken.”

Study affirms benefits of chelation, but that can't be so: In 2014, we reported extensively on the results of the TACT Study, a 30 million dollar undertaking by the National Institutes of Health that showed that heart attack survivors enjoyed decisive benefits from a course of intravenous chelation treatments.

But that conclusion is unacceptable to the foes of chelation, who trumpet “No, chelation does not outperform statins for heart disease.” But that wasn't the point of the TACT Study. Virtually all the patients receiving chelation in TACT were already on statins. Chelation was not intended to replace, but rather, to augment the benefits of cholesterol-lowering drugs.

It must really tick off the authors of this anti-chelation screed that, on the strength of the success of the initial

TACT study, the NIH has just appropriated funds for a large follow-up study, TACT 2! Stay tuned.

Bio-identical hormone treatments are no good: Science Daily drinks the Kool-Aid—"Untested, unapproved compounded hormone prescriptions reach 26 to 33 million a year; Despite the risks, the number approaches that for FDA-approved hormone therapies."

Consider the source: NAMS, the North American Menopause Society, heavily-subsidized by the pharmaceutical manufacturers of Premarin, Provera, and Prempro, synthetic versions of estrogen and progesterone. From the headline, we learn that droves of women are seeking preferable natural alternatives, evidently a source of concern from the drug-makers, who are seeing their profits eroded.

The truth is that natural HRT is safer and better-tolerated by most women. Many in the integrative medicine community are concerned that propaganda like this, floated by NAMS, is the beginning of a concerted campaign to get FDA to ban natural hormones. We can't let that happen!

Supplements are sending people to the hospital in droves: For worst story of the year, this surely takes the cake. In fact, as I pointed out in an article last year, it reeks of journalistic malpractice.

Add to that the lurid headlines earlier in the year that erroneously assailed the quality of herbs sold by major supplement retailers and you create a deliberate crisis of confidence for supplement takers. But the methodology used by New York's Attorney General was clearly faulty; he was widely accused of grandstanding for votes in the guise of consumer advocacy.

In no way do these "studies" impugn the quality of natural products manufactured by the majority of responsible players in the vitamin community. But a cabal of overzealous

legislators, ambitious regulators, and their journalistic enablers keeps pushing for tighter regulations to rein in the supplement industry, to the detriment of health-conscious consumers.

I hope you've enjoyed that little walk down Bad-Memory Lane, and that I've helped set the record straight if you missed any of these topics here on my website, or on my Facebook or Twitter, during the last year. As always, I strive to keep you up-to-date on the best Health and Wellness news – as well as the worst. I touched on many of these articles when they came out, and will continue to do so for any Bad News in 2016.