

Top Ten Worst Health Stories of 2019 (Part 2)



It's that time of year: I'm reprising my annual rendition of the year's *worst* health stories. These stories distinguish themselves by perpetuating stereotypes about the dangers or inefficacy of supplements or natural therapies, or alternatively, parroting outmoded concepts about diet.

In last week's article, I rolled out my first 5 picks for Worst Health Stories of 2019; this week, I'm rounding out my Top Ten with the following selections:

Dietary supplement regulation: In 2019, the medical establishment, in league with mainstream media, continued its drumbeat of calls for enhanced regulation of what they term “the Wild West” of the supplement industry. Amidst the relaxed regulatory climate of the Trump administration, editorial writers at *The Lancet* worry that “the FDA has shifted further in its pro-industry stance, continuing to prioritise unfettered consumerism at the expense of increasing safety and accountability.” For a more balanced assessment—and pushback against the claim that the supplement industry is unregulated—listen to my recent podcast with Brian Wommack, Vice President of the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN).

Vitamin D backlash: A predictable news cycle is emerging on vitamin D. Once shunned as a potentially toxic vitamin, to be given only in low doses and good merely for prevention of rickets, its potential as a hedge against infections, inflammation, painful conditions, autoimmunity, neurodegenerative disorders, childhood illness and metabolic syndrome dominated headlines during the recent “D Decade”.

Now, the doubters are back in force. In an article—typical of its genre—entitled “Is vitamin D hype wishful thinking”, *Web MD* reviews studies which appear to throw shade on D’s benefits. They go so far as to recommend that, for those with normal levels of vitamin D, supplements are unnecessary: “The best way to be sure to get enough of the nutrient is to go outside and get some sun.”

Good luck if you live anywhere in the U.S. above the latitude of Charleston, South Carolina, especially from October to April. This November, I sat around a pool in southerly San Diego for two hours without sunscreen while conversing with a colleague—and my skin didn’t even turn pink! And if you’re over 65, your skin may have lost the capacity to synthesize vitamin D with UV exposure. Add to that genetic propensities for people to require more vitamin D, or medical conditions that deplete it. Even many of the nutritionally savvy people

who become my patients were found to have suboptimal levels of D.

Let's stipulate that vitamin D is no universal panacea—to claim so would be simplistic. But most assuredly, the recent popularization of vitamin D supplementation has generated far more benefits than harms.

The War Against Keto: The popularization of the ketogenic diet has presented a dilemma for *Consumer Reports*, who used to dismiss it out of hand. This year they offered a more balanced assessment, admitting the Keto diet helps weight loss and may address certain conditions like Type 2 diabetes and seizure disorders. But they resurrect the worn shibboleth that Keto diets can result in ketoacidosis—a dangerous condition insulin-dependent diabetics get—conflating it with ketosis, a healthy and normal physiological adaptation that occurs during fasting or when carbs are zeroed out.

The *Consumer Reports* nutritionists admonish: “But carbohydrates as a group shouldn't be vilified . . . A healthy diet includes minimally processed whole grains, legumes, fruit, and vegetables.” They just don't get it!

Outmoded diet advice: *U.S. News & World Report* (they're still in existence?) doubles down on its ratings of popular diets. *U.S. News* “evaluated and ranked the 41 diets below with input from a panel of health experts”, ranking the Mediterranean Diet and DASH Diets #1 and #2 respectively.

Their version of the Mediterranean Diet is “low in red meat, sugar and saturated fat—not withstanding the fact that healthy Spaniards, Provençales, Italians, Greeks, North Africans, Balkan peoples and Turks consume plenty of lamb, goat, and full-fat cheese and yogurt, not to mention pork in non-Muslim countries.

The DASH Diet calls for even more draconian restriction of saturated fat. *U.S. News* says, “It emphasizes the foods you've

always been told to eat (fruits, veggies, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy).”

By contrast, the Paleo Diet and Keto Diet are ranked near the bottom, at #33 and #38 respectively. Their comments about the Paleo Diet reveal a distinct bias: “The high-protein diet is ranked poorly among *U.S. News* experts, who consider it too restrictive to be healthy or sustainable.”

The Whole 30 Diet, which I find enormously helpful for many of my patients (see my review here) is relegated to a tie with the Keto Diet at #38.

These outmoded ratings are at variance with recent studies that exonerate meat and full-fat dairy, and underscore the utility of carbohydrate restriction for combatting the scourges of obesity and metabolic syndrome.

Good fats/bad fats: Non-profit website HelpGuide.org continued to proffer—like many others of its ilk—anachronistic diet recommendations in 2019, repeating the worn shibboleth: “‘Bad’ fats, such as artificial trans fats and saturated fats, are guilty of the unhealthy things all fats have been blamed for—weight gain, clogged arteries, an increased risk of certain diseases and so forth.”

By contrast, they claim, “good fats” include soybean and safflower oils. The authors of these recommendations ignore evidence that refined polyunsaturated oils are potent sources of pro-inflammatory Omega-6 fats, whose presence disrupts metabolism. Yet many “authoritative” sources—including the American Heart Association—continue to erroneously recommend that Americans replace butter, lard, and tropical oils like coconut with corn, soy, safflower and canola oils.

And there you have it! My roundup of the worst health stories of the year. Join me on Facebook or Twitter, and let me know which story you thought really scraped the bottom of the barrel.