

Hard to swallow: the truth behind the health myths

Health has long been an area beset by superstition and spurious claims, and despite our medical advances, some common myths persist. By Johanna Leggatt

- [More health news and features](#)

In physicist Claudius Galen's day - around 130AD - illness was thought to be the excess of one of the four humours (yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood), which were treatable by bloodletting and purges.

While medicine has come a long way since then, some common myths still abound. Where medical science has faltered or been less than decisive, we have stepped in to fill in the gaps of our knowledge as we seek ways of making sense of our bodies' mysterious workings.



Contrary to popular opinion, eight glasses of water a day is not necessary

Drink plenty of water, avoid carbohydrates to lose weight and detoxify regularly are just some of the 21st-century health mantras that are often unquestioningly accepted.

Here, telegraph.co.uk, addresses some of the most commonly held health axioms in a bid to sort the fact from the fiction.

Health mantra: we must drink eight glasses of water a day

Reality: This is one of the most popular and pervasive myths, and according to Telegraph columnist Dr James Le Fanu, it is also entirely untrue.

"The myth comes from a holistic notion that you need that amount of water per day to flush all of the toxins out of the body," said Dr Le Fanu.

In fact we need only need 750ml to one litre of water, per day. "Quite simply, if we exceed that amount, we will simply excrete it."

Health mantra two: certain foods prevent cancer

Reality: Despite many newspaper reports that a low-fat diet and plenty of exercise has the potential to prevent cancer, Dr Le Fanu says cancer is, and always will be, a question of age.

"Cancer is an age-determined disease, which means your likelihood of getting it increases as you get older," Dr Le Fanu said.

"That is overwhelmingly the determiner, rather than diet."

Eating well and exercising will of course contribute to overall wellbeing, but it should not be viewed as the holy grail of cancer prevention.

Health mantra three: antibiotics and alcohol don't mix

Reality: One of the most prevalent misconceptions Dr Le Fanu comes across is that alcohol and antibiotics shouldn't be mixed. "I get asked this all the time and people are very relieved to find out that drinking alcohol while on antibiotics will not hinder their efficacy."

The NHS, however, does recommend avoiding alcohol while on the drugs Metronidazole and Tinidazole, as it may cause flushing, headaches and vomiting.

Health mantra: carbohydrates are to be avoided if you want to lose weight

Reality: Not so. According to eatwell.gov.uk, the website of the Food Standards Agency, starchy foods only become fattening when actual fat, such as cream or margarine, is added to the meal.

Gram for gram, starchy foods contain less than half the calories of fat. Starchy meals should ideally make up a third of the average diet, and the FSA advises using wholegrain varieties where possible, to ensure you receive additional nutrients and fibre.

Health mantra: computers may be harmful to our health

Reality: Sadly this is the case. According to independent health website, netdoctor.co.uk, the long-term repetitive use of computers can cause back muscle strain, RSI and eye-strain. The desk that employees use, as well as the chair and computer all have to meet certain ergonomic standards, so that you are able to sit comfortably and upright, and do not feel any eye or back strain.

To minimize eye strain it is recommended that employees take regular breaks and look away from their screen every 20 minutes for 20 seconds. Screen filters and footstools may also prove helpful.

Health mantra: shaving causes hair to grow back faster or coarser

Reality: It's a rumour that is no doubt convenient for the hair-removal industry, but let's put it straight: shaving hair will in no way make it grow back thicker, or any faster.

According to US researchers, who conducted a study last year on commonly held health myths, the illusion of thicker locks is created because the hair grows back blunt-ended without the fine tapered ends of unshaven hair.

Furthermore, the sun naturally bleaches hair over time so hair that is newly emerged may seem darker but is, in fact, no darker than any other new hair growth.

Health mantra: poor diet and hygiene cause acne

Reality: This is a common one, and generally, most doctors agree that acne is the direct manifestation of the production of hormones, which explains why it is so prevalent in teenagers. As Dr Le Fanu points out, when treating acne, doctors turn not to dietary treatments, but very often prescription drugs.

That is not to suggest, however, that in some people a vast improvement in diet won't have a noticeable impact on their skin.

Health mantra: detoxifying the body is the ultimate path to wellbeing

Reality: Detoxification has been hugely successful in the West in recent years - and expensive too - as men and women part with large sums of money for colonic treatments and embark on post-partying cleansing rituals.

But according to Dr Simon Singh and Dr Edzard Ernst in their book, *Trick or Treatment: Alternative Medicine on Trial*, the human body is well equipped with organs that are marvelous at detoxifying what we put in our bodies.

Gentle exercise and plenty of water are all that are needed to get the human body back on track after a period of over-indulgence. Anything else, they argue (colonics included), is likely to be a waste of time and money.