

Healthy eating: do you have portion distortion?

Following health advice can be a minefield...read on to find out the real truth about some of the most common myths surrounding health in the 21st Century.

You ought to know the drill by now: drink eight glasses of water a day, eat five portions of fruit and veg, get eight hours' sleep a night, and so on. When it comes to wellbeing, there are plenty of easy formulas to get your teeth into. There are even number-based mantras to help you counteract high blood pressure, tiredness and excess flab.

All this number-crunching is enough to give you a headache. With an intense focus on daily quotas - the Government recently spent £10 million as part of its "Know Your Limits" campaign to curb excess drinking - more and more of us rely on a health-by-numbers approach.

But could it be short-changing the nation's health, or even endangering it by oversimplification? We asked wellbeing experts to help unravel the truth about portion distortion.



Know your recommendations: stay hydrated

Drink eight glasses of water a day

Celebs often attribute their glowing good looks to a daily two-litre H₂O fix (rather than, say, Botox). "But it's complete rubbish," says nutritionist Fiona Hunter. "First, anything with a high fluid content will keep you hydrated." A piece of steak is at least 60 per cent water, which will add to your fluid intake. "And the amount you need depends on body size, lifestyle, whether it's hot?... You might need to drink just a few glasses of water a day or two and a half litres."

So how do we find our ideal intake? Your body is the best guide, says Hunter. "Just look for signs of dehydration - lethargy, low concentration, headaches, dark urine and constipation."

Limit yourself to three cups of coffee a day

Coffee and tea are dehydrating, so you should limit your intake and replace each cup one-for-one with water. "A myth," replies Dr Chris Smith of BBC radio series *The Naked Scientists*. "These drinks don't dehydrate you unless they're very strong. An average coffee hydrates you. I drink hardly anything but tea and coffee, so my bladder ought to be like a raisin. Even alcohol has to be more than 10 per cent alcohol by volume to affect your fluid levels adversely. There are limits - pregnant women should seek advice - but we've drunk tea and coffee for decades without all keeling over."

Take 30 minutes' moderate exercise, three times a week

This is a cornerstone of official health advice - with one small hitch. "The figure is meaningless," says Matt Roberts, fitness trainer to Sting and Naomi Campbell. "It

assumes people know what 'moderate' exercise is. But to most of us, it means housework or walking the kids to school, and that's not enough. On a scale, if one is being asleep and 10 is keeling over exhausted, you need to be hitting a nine by running, training or swimming, until you can't do much more, at least three times a week."

Men should drink no more than 3 or 4 units of alcohol a day (2 to 3 units for women)

Government guidelines on alcohol are pitched to keep us happy as well as healthy. But how credible are they? "These numbers are easy to disprove," says Mike Shallcross of Men's Health, "but I feel for the guys who come up with them - they admit they're not very accurate, but say an inaccurate figure is better than none." The truth, says Shallcross, is that there is no precise guide. "These numbers err towards caution. But use common sense. If you feel fit and healthy, you probably have your alcohol intake about right."

Eat five portions of fruit and veg a day

The wisdom of this rule has been enshrined by both the NHS, which has just launched a healthy-eating drive for low-income families, and M&S, which slathers such details on its packaging. So it must be backed by lots of research? "Actually, different countries suggest different quotas," says Dr Sarah Brewer, author of the Natural Health Guru guides. "It's only five portions here because so many people in Britain eat none at all." The Japanese are told to eat 17 portions of fruit and veg a day. A recent Harvard University report suggested you're 30 per cent less likely to have a heart attack if you eat eight portions a day. So how much should we eat? "Studies show green vegetables are better against heart disease," says Dr Brewer. "So maybe more helpful advice would be, 'Eat more than five portions of vegetables, then have some fruit, too.'?"

Sleep eight hours a night

To function well, we all need that gold standard of a good night's sleep, the Full Eight Hours. Or do we? "That's like saying all women need size eight dresses," says Professor Jim Horne, of the Sleep Research Centre at Loughborough University. "That figure is actually dangerous - people who're fine on six or seven hours are told it's not enough, so you create a million more insomniacs seeking treatment." So what's the optimum amount? "If you're not tired, you're getting enough."

Women need no more than 1,940 calories a day (2,550 for men)

Calorie counts, health's original magic numbers, are the tightrope we walk towards shapelier bodies. But focusing on them is potentially hazardous, says Dr Shrilla Banerjee, consultant cardiologist at University College Hospital. "We're seeing a global epidemic of heart disease," she says, "so there's a drive to give people simple target figures. But cutting down on calorific food isn't enough. The aim should be to live healthier lives all round."

Get 15 minutes' sunlight a day

Your body needs exposure to the sun to create vitamin D - but the 15-minute figure commits a multitude of sins, says Zest's Alison Pylkkänen. "It really depends who you are, how old, dark or fair skin, and so on." A truer figure would also depend on our use of sunblock. "We learnt relatively recently that sunlight causes skin cancer and we've over-corrected," says Pylkkänen. "While 15 minutes might give us the bare minimum of vitamin D, you get none if you're covered in SPF50."

Take 20,000 steps a day

Remember the craze for wearing a pedometer a few years ago? How useful is it, health-wise, to know that you're clocking up 20,000 steps a day? "Not very," says Dr Chris Beedie, triathlete and development director for Virgin Active health clubs. "It's the level of activity, not number of steps, that's relevant. So go a little harder at whatever you're doing and get out of breath a little bit more."