

Definitive Answer to Some of Your Biggest Health Questions

- Compiled by Mr S V Saibaba, Former AGM, Indian Bank

1. Does olive oil prevent heart disease?

Short answer: Yes

The health benefits of olive oil come from the presence of polyphenols, antioxidants. That reduces the risk of heart diseases and cancers. But to get these healthy compounds, consumers should buy good-quality, fresh "extra-virgin" olive oil, which has the highest polyphenol content. Most commercially available olive oils have low levels of polyphenols associated with poor harvesting methods, improper storage, and heavy processing.

2. Do cough syrups work?

Short answer: No

In 2006, the Nation's chest physicians agreed that the majority of over-the-counter cough medicines don't actually work.

These colorful syrups typically contain doses of codeine and dextromethorphan that are too small to be effective. Only cough suppressants that contain older antihistamines seem to relieve coughs. That includes brompheniramine, an active ingredient in Dimetapp.

3. Is the MSG (Mono Sodium Glutamate) in Chinese likely to give you a headache?

Short answer: No

A review of 40 years of clinical trials, published in the journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners in 2006, found that all previous research "failed to identify a consistent relationship between the consumption of MSG and the constellation of symptoms that comprise the syndrome," including headaches and asthma attacks. The misconception spawned from several poorly-done small studies in the 1960's that seemed to connect MSG with a variety of maladies that people experienced after eating at Chinese restaurants.

4. Do nuts make you fat?

Short answer: No

As much as 75% of a nut is fat. But eating fat doesn't necessarily make you fat. The bigger factor leading to weight gain is portion-size.

Luckily, nuts are loaded with healthy fats that keep you full. They're also a good source of protein and fibre. One study even found that whole almonds have 20% less calories than previously thought because a lot of the fat is excreted from the body.

5. Is walking as effective as running?

Short answer: Yes

Studies have shown that how long you exercise - and thus how many calories you burn is more important than how hard you exercise. Running is a more efficient form of exercise, but not necessarily better for you. A six-year study published in the journal Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology in April found that walking at a moderate pace and running produced similar health benefits, so long as the same amount of energy was expended.

6. Is drinking fruit juice as good for you as eating fruit?

Short answer: No

Calorie for calorie, whole fruit provides more nutritional benefits than drinking the pure juice of that fruit. That's because when you liquefy fruit, stripping away the peel and dumping the pulp, many ingredients like Fibre, calcium, vitamin C, and other antioxidants are lost.

For comparison, a five-ounce glass of orange juice that contains 69 calories has 3 grams of dietary fibre and 16 milligrams of calcium, whereas an orange with the same number of calories packs 3.1 grams of fibre and 60 milligrams of calcium.

7. Are all wheat breads better for you than white bread?

Short answer: No

Not all wheat breads are created equal. Wheat breads that contain all parts of the grain kernel, including the nutrient-rich germ and fibre-dense bran, must be labelled "whole grain" or "whole wheat." Some wheat breads are just white bread with a little bit of caramel colouring to make the bread appear healthier, according to Reader's Digest.

8. Does coffee cause cancer?

Short answer: No

Coffee got a bad reputation in the 1980's when a study linked drinking coffee to pancreatic cancer. The preliminary report was later debunked. More recently, health studies have swung in favour of the caffeinated beverage. Coffee has been linked to a lower risk of type 2 diabetes, Parkinson's disease, liver cancer, and even suicide.

9. Do eggs raise cholesterol levels?

Short answer: No

Although egg yolks are a major source of cholesterol - a waxy substance that resembles fat - researchers have learned that saturated fat has more of an impact on cholesterol in your blood than eating foods that contain cholesterol. "Healthy individuals with normal blood cholesterol levels should now feel free to enjoy foods like eggs in their diet every day," the lead researcher from a 25-year University of Arizona study on cholesterol concluded.

10. Can you drink too much water?

Short answer: Yes

It is very rare for someone to die from drinking too much water, but it can happen. Over-hydrating is most common among elite athletes. Drinking an excess of water, called water intoxication, dilutes the concentration of sodium in the blood leading to a condition known as hyponatremia. The symptoms of hyponatremia can range from nausea and confusion to seizures and even death in severe cases. To avoid this, drink fluids with electrolytes during extreme exercise events.

11. Can yogurt ease digestive problems?

Short answer: Yes

Our digestive tract is filled with microorganisms - some good and some bad. Yogurt contains beneficial bacteria, generically called probiotics, that helps maintain a healthy balance. Probiotics can relieve several gastrointestinal problems, including constipation and diarrhoea. Certain brands of yogurts, like Activa by Dannon, are marketed exclusively to treat tummy issues.

12. Do whitening toothpastes whiten teeth more than regular toothpastes?

Short answer: No

Whitening toothpastes usually contain peroxides and other strong abrasives that might make your teeth appear whiter by removing stains. Unlike at-home whitening strips and gels that contain bleach, these toothpastes do not actually change the colour of your teeth.

13. Is it safe to microwave food in plastic containers?

Short answer: Yes

But the plastic container should display the words "microwave safe." This means that the Food and Drug Administration has tested the container to make sure no chemicals used to make the plastic leech into foods during microwaving. If chemicals do seep out into food, the amounts are tiny and not dangerous to our health. As a general guideline, plastic grocery bags as well as most plastic tubs that hold margarine, yogurt, cream cheese, and condiments are not microwave safe.

14. Can watching TV ruin your eyesight?

Short answer: No

Watching TV will not destroy your rods and cones as the outdated myth suggests. Before the 1950's, TVs emitted radiation that could increase an individual's risk of eye problems after excessive TV viewing. Modern TVs have special shielding that blocks these harmful emissions.

