

HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF HEALTH STUDIES

By: Linda Hepler

If a recent report by consumer watchdog The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) linking caramel coloring in soda to cancer had you dumping your favorite cola down the drain posthaste – you're not alone. It's easy nowadays to have a bad case of health news anxiety. After all, it seems as if every time you turn around, something that you'd previously considered to be relatively harmless is found to be capable of striking you dead – if you don't watch out.

But it may not be quite as bad as it sounds. Nothing sells the news as quickly as fear, says Elizabeth Lyster, MD, a California obstetrician/gynecologist who specializes in hormonal issues. And people seem to have a morbid fascination with scary things. Yet the underlying reason behind the interest in health news, she believes, is a real need for health information and education – a need that is not always met by physicians. "In times past, people used to know, like and trust their doctor," explains Dr. Lyster. "Or even if they didn't like him, they at least knew and trusted him. Today, people feel less connection with their doctors."

In large part, according to Dr. Lyster, this lack of connection has to do with the limited amount of time doctors have to spend with their patients these days. According to a recent Medscape survey, the average length of a physician visit is about 13 minutes – enough time for a quick history and physical examination, but not nearly enough time for the quality of health education that many people want.

So most of us – some 80 percent, in fact – go online to search for health information, according to Nancy Hicks, Associate Director of North America Healthcare practice, a branch of Ketchum, a global communications company. What is more, says Hicks, a full 60 percent of those who seek health information online say that what they find there affects the decisions they make about their health.

But it's hard to make health decisions when there's so much information out there that seems controversial or conflicting, or that changes frequently. Alcohol, for example, has been linked to an increased risk for breast cancer, yet many studies show red wine to be heart healthy. Calcium supplements, long considered to be essential in the treatment of osteoporosis, have recently come under fire as a risk factor for heart problems. And the prostate specific antigen (PSA) test, used to screen for prostate cancer, and once a routine part of a 40-plus male physical, is believed by many experts to be unnecessary, perhaps even harmful, as it may lead to needless needle biopsies for those who do not have cancer.

How to be a savvy health consumer and keep from spinning in circles when you read the latest health reports? Consider this advice from the experts:

What to know: Scary news headlines feed our fears. After all, who wouldn't be terrified to learn that a mosquito bite or even an affectionate lick on the face from Fido may cause a deadly disease?

What to do: Keep in mind that headlines don't always reflect reality, and read them with a grain of salt, says Melina B. Jampolis, MD, a diet and fitness expert for CNNHealth.com. "Many health news reports incorrectly generalize, and the reporters don't necessarily have the capacity to interpret the study the report is discussing," she adds.

Dr. Lyster agrees. "If you feel scared and concerned when reading health reports online, step away from the computer and review things with your doc. He or she may even be able to track down the original study and help you to understand it better," she says.

What to know: Your risks – or your benefits – may not be as great as the health news portrays. A big source of confusion in understanding how research data is presented, says Dr. Lyster, is the difference between relative risk and absolute risk. For example: 100 women are given a new drug that is thought to reduce the risk of developing breast cancer, and 100 women are given a placebo drug (dummy pill). Three years later, two of the women who took the real medication develop breast cancer and four of those who took the placebo develop breast cancer. The results can be reported in relative risk reduction – the two women who took the drug and developed cancer are only half the number of those who took the placebo and developed cancer – or a 50 percent reduction in risk with the drug. If these results are reported in absolute risk, 2 percent, or 2 out of 100 who took the drug developed breast cancer, and 4 percent, or 4 out of 100 who took the placebo developed breast cancer, so the absolute difference is only 2 percent, or 4 percent minus 2 percent. Which headline would you pay attention to – a 50 percent risk reduction using a drug that reduces your risk for breast cancer – or a 2 percent risk reduction?



What to do: Keep in mind when reading health news that it can be more sensational to report things in relative or absolute risk, depending upon the situation.

What to know: One study (or even two or three) is not cause for changing your lifestyle. "People often overreact to one study," says Dr. Jampolis. "You have to look at who the study was done on, how it was done and whether the results apply to you."

In other words, she says, a study done on animals won't necessarily be replicated in a human population. And research results from a group of elderly, African-American men may not be relevant to a young, Asian woman. Something else to consider – "A study author has a pre-existing bias. Of course, they think their conclusions are right. You need to read in a report whether other reputable sources are quoted, sources who are not involved in the study, to get a more balanced view."

What to do: If you enjoy reading health news, do so, advises Dr. Jampolis. "But before making lifestyle changes, talk to your doctor or health care provider about your unique situation. You need to customize health advice to your specific needs. No one size fits all."

What to know: Different sources of information may give entirely different advice about the same health issue.

What to do: If you read a health news report that is scary or that you don't understand, use your common sense, says Dr. Jampolis. If you need more information, ask your doctor or health care professional. Or look it up using a credible source such as WebMD.com or MayoClinic.com, she adds. Another good source, according to Dr. Lyster – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC.gov. **MS&F**