

Don't believe the hype: 6 tips to identify trustworthy health information

(courtesy of the McMaster Aging Portal, <https://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/>)

It seems like almost every day we hear about the “latest, greatest” new study, publicizing the benefits of a new cure, treatment or anti-aging solution. However, very few of these studies are as impressive as they sound.

It is a good idea to be cautious about trending health topics in the news. If you unknowingly base a health decision on a recommendation that has no scientific research to back it up, is based on very poorly conducted studies, or — even worse — disregards good quality studies suggesting their claims are wrong, you are unlikely to find that recommendation lives up to its hype. Unfounded health recommendations might even be harmful to your health.

Learning to recognize credible advice supported by the best available research will help you make informed choices that are most likely to benefit you.

Tread with caution: “A new study shows...”

Ask these six questions to critique the latest “miracle solution” you read about in the headlines.

1) What's the source? Checking the trustworthiness of news sources and references behind the claims is a first step. Does the source have standards for measuring the credibility of the information or advice they share? Or are they more likely to report sensational headlines to boost their click or viewer numbers?

Look for proof that any claims or recommendations are supported by study findings published in a credible academic journal. Always question celebrity claims, overly dramatic findings or miracle cures.

2) What's in it for them? Do the researchers, their funders or the groups sharing the information stand to benefit from the results? You may be aware that celebrities and media programs often have sponsorships or behind-the-scenes partnerships that could bias their claims... well, this also applies to research. It is wise to be skeptical of studies supported or promoted by for-profit businesses that are trying to sell you something.

3) How many people were involved in the study? The more people involved in a study, the more power researchers have to make conclusions and generalize the results to a larger group. A study that shows Tai Chi improves balance in 7 out of 10 people sounds great, but with such a small group, it is hard to know whether these results are just a coincidence, or related to specific characteristics of the people involved. If 700 out of

1000 people show these same benefits, you can have more confidence that Tai Chi can help boost your balance.

4) Was there a control group? The highest quality studies randomly select participants to try the activity or treatment, and compare results to a group that do not participate. This way, they can tease out the benefits of the activity, controlling for other influences. For example, did a walking group program *actually* encourage participants to walk more, or did a seasonal change from winter to spring during the study period encourage more people to be active outdoors?

5) How long did the study last? Short-term measurements of treatment benefits are useful. However, studies that use accurate and reliable ways to measure effects more than once and over a longer period (say, 6 months or a year later) provide more information about long-term benefits as well as any potential long-term side effects or harms.

6) Will it work for me? Consider your own personal needs, preferences and circumstances when making health decisions. For example, research shows compression bandages applied by a home health care provider are the most effective treatment for foot ulcers. However, many people do not like wearing these bandages and so do not use them as prescribed. In some cases, it may be best to choose a less effective treatment option, but one that you will actually put into practice.

If in doubt... check with the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal

Blog posts and **evidence summaries** on the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal are based on high quality systematic reviews. These are the most trustworthy research findings that compare the results of many studies exploring a common research question. The authors look for similarities between the single studies and make conclusions based on all the findings combined. The best reviews include all available studies on a topic, and give more weight to the highest quality studies.

Web Resource Ratings on the Portal's web site also do the homework for you. They assess the quality of online healthy aging resources based on a 5-star rating scale, to help you identify good quality information and make informed health decisions.

The McMaster Optimal Aging Portal is your source for information that you can trust. Visit:

<https://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/about/content-for-citizens> to find out more.