Evaluating dietary advice

The list of people providing dietary advice can include friends, family members, personal trainers, celebrity chefs, journalists, bloggers, naturopaths, nutritionists, dieticians, doctors and psychologists. We find information in newspapers, on the TV and we search online.

It can be difficult to distinguish the helpful advice from the unhelpful. Often advice from one source totally contradicts advice from another! While all of these people may be well intentioned, not all of them are qualified. This can be both confusing and potentially dangerous for consumers. It can be confusing to receive mixed messages about our diet. It is potentially dangerous when we make dietary changes based on information that is not reliable or factual.

By changing the way we consider dietary advice, we can start reducing the confusion and risks and begin to take a more helpful and critical stance.

Evaluating advice from other people

When others give us dietary advice it is important to consider whether they are qualified to do so, otherwise what they tell us might just be their opinion, or their particular bias. It can be tricky to evaluate whether someone is adequately qualified. Many titles used in the health and fitness industry do not require a particular qualification (for example, anyone can call themselves a ‘health and fitness expert’, with or without qualifications). It is important to evaluate how credible a source of advice is by asking:

1) Does someone need a qualification to use this title?
2) Is the profession regulated by a national board and do individuals practising in the profession need to be registered with the board?
3) Do they need to engage in continued professional development to keep their knowledge current?

Searching for advice

Often people interested in diets search for information independently. The way we search affects the sort of information we find. For example, if we are concerned about the impacts of eating carbohydrates on our weight we might search online for “carbohydrates and weight gain”.

This can lead to biased results because of the “filter in” and “filter out” phenomenon. That is, you will most likely:

a) filter in web pages that do talk about there being links between carbohydrates and weight gain, and
b) filter out any that do not talk about or debunk such links.

This unhelpful searching can therefore reinforce our belief that there is a link!!

There are two steps you can take to change the way you gather and filter information from the internet.

Step 1: Practice using more helpful and less biased search phrases to find out what you want to know.

E.g., Instead of “Carbohydrates and weight gain” you could search “The function of carbohydrates”.

Step 2: Look for ways of including alternative view points. You can do this by typing in mismatching statements. E.g. “carbohydrates are bad” and “carbohydrates are good”

These strategies can lead to you coming up with some very different information!

Critically evaluating information

Even when using helpful search strategies, not all of the information we find is factual. Unfortunately, anyone with access to the internet can put information online and claim it as fact. Alternatively, some website or magazine articles can also appear to contain useful information from reputable sources. So how do we know what is good information and what is not so good?

These questions can help us evaluate the credibility of information:

1) Is this written by a qualified and registered health professional (e.g. GP, Dietitian, Psychologist)?
2) Does the author represent an established and reputable health organisation (e.g. government body, university, major hospital)?
3) Is the author free of commercial interests (i.e. they are not trying to sell you a product, service, or sell a story)?
4) Does the article include multiple pieces of evidence to back up its claims (i.e. discusses the results of several research studies conducted by reputable organisations rather than anecdotal stories or one-off studies)?
5) Is enough information provided for you to check the background research for yourself?
6) Was the background research based on people similar to yourself (e.g. similar age, height/weight, gender, diagnosis, comorbid problems etc.)?
7) Was the background research based on many people?
8) Are statistics clearly explained?
9) Is this information consistent with health information you have read from other reputable sources, (e.g. other government bodies, universities, major hospitals)?
10) Is a review date provided so that you can tell the information is up-to-date?

The more ticks you have above, the better the information is likely to be. However, it is important to remember that information from the internet and media is one resource only, and should never be used alone to make important changes to your diet, exercise or other lifestyle choices.

Before you make any changes...

If after evaluating your dietary advice, you would still like to make changes, follow-up with your GP or dietitian, who can help you understand the specific risks and benefits of such changes based on your particular medical and/or psychological history.