

# Evaluating Dietary Advice

## Dietary Advice

Dietary advice seems to be everywhere these days - we get it from friends, family members, dietitians, doctors and psychologists, personal trainers, celebrity chefs, journalists, bloggers, naturopaths, nutritionists...even strangers! There's information online, through social media, in magazines and books, on the TV and through word of mouth.

With all of that unvetted information floating around it can be difficult to figure out what's actually accurate, and 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 or well-informed. This can be confusing as we try to make sense of mixed messages about what we're eating. It is also potentially dangerous to make dietary changes based on information that is not reliable, factual, or tailored to our individual needs.



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

## Searching for Advice

Often people interested in diets search for information themselves, usually on the internet. However, the way we search for advice affects the sort of information we will find. If we are concerned about the impact on our weight of eating carbohydrates we might type "carbohydrates lead to weight gain" into the google search bar.

This can return biased results because of the "filter in" and "filter out" phenomenon. That is, you will most likely:

- filter in web pages that *do* talk about there being links between carbohydrates and weight gain, and
- 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!! This is called confirmation bias because essentially we have gone looking for information that will confirm a belief we already hold.

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

**Step 1:** Practice using more balanced, neutral, and less biased search phrases to find out what you want to know. For example, instead of "carbohydrates lead to weight gain" you could search "the effects of carbohydrates".

**Step 2:** Look for ways of including alternative view points. You can do this by typing in mismatching statements. For example, "carbohydrates are unhealthy" and "carbohydrates are healthy".

Have a go and see what you notice...these strategies can lead to you coming up with some very different information!



## Evaluating Sources of Advice

When other people 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 represent a biased view they hold. It can sometimes be tricky to determine whether someone is adequately qualified. For example, many titles you may have seen in the health and fitness industry do not require a formal qualification or training—anyone can call themselves a 'health and fitness expert'. It is important to evaluate how credible a source of advice is by asking:

- 1) Do you need a qualification to use this title?
- 2) Does the title mean the person can be held responsible for the accuracy of their statements?
- 3) Is their profession regulated by a national board and do individuals practising in this profession need to be registered?
- 4) Does somebody in this profession need to engage in continued professional development to keep their knowledge current?

## Critically Evaluating Information

Even when using helpful search strategies, not all of the information we find is accurate. Unfortunately, many people present information and claim it as fact when it may not be evidence based. So how do we know what information is reliable? 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 that profession reliably train people to conduct and/or interpret scientific research?
- 3) Does the author represent an established and reputable health organisation (e.g. government, university, hospital)?
- 4) Is the author free of commercial interests (i.e. they are not trying to sell you a product, service, or a story)?
- 5) Does the article include reliable evidence to back up its claims (i.e. several large research studies conducted rather than anecdotal stories or one-off studies)?
- 6) Is enough information provided for you to check the background research for yourself (i.e., research citations)?
- 7) Is this information consistent with health information you have read from other reputable sources, (e.g. other government bodies, universities, hospitals)? What do those sources say about the information?
- 8) Is a review date provided so that you can tell the information is up-to-date?

## Seek a Second Opinion

When making substantial changes to something like your eating or exercise habits, it can be helpful to seek a second opinion. If after evaluating your dietary advice, you would still like to make changes, we recommend speaking to a GP or a dietitian, who can help you understand any benefits or drawbacks that may be relevant to you specifically. If you have an eating disorder it may be helpful to speak with somebody who has specific knowledge about eating disorders.