



HEALTH

#Cured

We know we shouldn't get medical info from the internet, but social media claims can be hard to ignore. Instead of double-tapping ourselves into panic mode, let's see what the experts say about some viral health and wellness myths.

BY JESSICA MIGALA

AT SOME POINT, most of us have typed our symptoms into Dr. Google against our better judgment. Now Dr. TikTok, Dr. Instagram, and Dr. YouTube have entered the chat, with creators making claims about nutrition, hormones, immunity, and more. Some are licensed medical professionals, and some are “wellness experts” who want you to leach out your toxins by putting raw potatoes in your socks. “There’s been a rise in health and science influencers. Many have good intentions—and others do not,” says Jessica Steier, a doctor of public health and the founder of *The Unbiased Science Podcast* (@unbiasedscipod), which critically examines the evidence for various health claims. These “experts” may proffer misinformation that’s at best a waste of time (and potatoes) and at worst truly harmful. Other health creators—even some MDs—are only interested in selling you products. To help suss out suspect info, we asked legit members of medical social media to debunk five of the most viral myths.

THE MYTH: Certain health foods aren't actually healthy.

THE DEBUNKER: Nicole Rodriguez, registered dietitian nutritionist and certified personal trainer @notoriously.nicole.rd

What’s not to love about good old oatmeal? Nutritious and filling, it’s a go-to for many health-conscious eaters. But on social media, the beloved breakfast has its share of haters—mainly the type of low-carb-living evangelists who label plant-based foods as poisonous. They insist oatmeal raises your blood sugar so high, you might as well eat a candy bar.

“Oatmeal increases blood sugar, but that’s our body’s normal response to any carb-containing food,” Rodriguez says. “The real story is that most Americans need more whole grains and fiber.” Almost all U.S. adults (95%) skimp on fiber, and we need it because it’s linked to improved heart health and digestion. A one-cup serving of cooked oats packs four grams—about 15% of your daily requirement. If blood sugar is a concern, combine oats with protein (like a poached egg or egg whites) and a plant-based fat (like avocado) to help your body digest the meal more slowly.

And have you heard the hubbub about seed oils—canola, corn, sunflower, and peanut, to name a few? They’ve been maligned online for supposedly causing heart attacks, diabetes, and other issues. But the data was misinterpreted, according to Rodriguez. Yes, health problems have risen in conjunction with our higher intake of seed oils. The culprit, though, is the products that often contain the oils—fast food, packaged snacks, and baked goods, which tend to be highly processed and have loads of saturated fat, sodium, and calories. The oils themselves aren’t harmful. In fact, they’re rich in omega-6s, unsaturated fatty acids our bodies need to function properly. If you love to cook with canola oil, go right ahead, though Rodriguez also recommends olive oil, which benefits heart and brain health.

Finally, smoothies. They’re criticized for their high sugar content—but when they’re made right, they can be a nutritious, fiber-filled package. So drink up because, again, the more pressing problem is that you probably need more produce in your diet. “We’re in a real fruit and vegetable consumption crisis,” Rodriguez says. Just 10% of adults get enough produce per day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And guess what’s an amazing vehicle for fruits and vegetables: smoothies! Add a source of protein (milk, yogurt, protein powder) and healthy fats (avocado, nut butter), Rodriguez advises, and you have a great, portable meal.

THE MYTH: You can “boost” your immune system to better fight off illness.

THE DEBUNKER: Andrea Love, PhD, microbiologist, immunologist, and founder of the science and health communication organization ImmunoLogic @dr.andrealove

If you want to help your immune system, stay current on all your vaccines and don’t worry about the turmeric cocktails, frozen carrot-and-ginger “immunity cubes,” and salt baths for your feet. The immune system is an incredibly complex, tightly regulated network. White blood cells constantly

Some social media influencers are medical professionals, and some want you to detox by putting raw potatoes in your socks.

patrol your body, looking for invaders to fight off. These cells work with certain organs (like your spleen, which produces antibodies), tissues (like bone marrow, which produces blood cells), and the lymphatic system, which carries away destroyed bacteria and other waste products, Love says. Strengthening such an intricate system of interdependent parts isn't just a matter of ratcheting it up. "You can't flex the immune system like a muscle, which is what some unsubstantiated claims suggest," Love says. And even if you could, pumping up your immune system wouldn't necessarily be a good thing. Too much "strength" in your immune system is a hallmark of inflammatory disorders, like allergies and autoimmune diseases, in which your body attacks substances it shouldn't. What you can do is *support* your immune system with (surprise) healthy habits—getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, eating a well-balanced diet, limiting alcohol, avoiding tobacco, and practicing good hygiene. Hopefully, you're trying to do all that stuff anyway.

THE MYTH: Your digestive/skin/mood woes are definitely a food sensitivity issue.

THE DEBUNKER: David Stukus, MD, pediatric allergist and director of the Food Allergy Center at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio @allergykidsdoc

Maybe you've seen an influencer claim they discovered a sensitivity to a certain food—lima beans, kiwi, brewer's yeast—and once they eliminated it, their troubling symptoms disappeared. No matter how alluring you find the idea of a quick fix, hold off on ordering that pricey DIY testing kit. The term "food sensitivity" is so vague, it's



almost meaningless. Having a food *allergy* means your body mounts an immune reaction when you encounter a specific protein (in cow's milk, eggs, fish, etc.). Having a food sensitivity just means you don't digest that food well. "It's a made-up term with no clear diagnostic criteria or consensus definition by experts," Stukus says. Allergies can be detected by skin-prick testing, in which very small amounts of allergens are placed under the skin's surface to see if a reaction takes place, but there are no validated ways to detect sensitivities. If you order one of the at-home tests heavily promoted on social media, it will probably just measure IgG, an antibody that's part of a normal immune response to eating. The results can show only that you've eaten the food recently, not whether it's problematic

for you. Avoiding foods based on the results of these tests can lead to an unnecessarily restrictive diet, nutritional deficiencies, and disordered eating, Stukus says. Plus, influencers peddling the tests may use them as bait to enroll followers in long-term programs that call for more testing—and a lot more money. If you have serious concerns about your gastrointestinal tract, see your primary care provider, who can help diagnose you or refer you to a specialist.

THE MYTH: Everyone has ADHD.

THE DEBUNKER: Sanam Hafeez, PsyD, neuropsychologist and founder of Comprehensive Consultation Psychological Services in New York City @drsanamhafeez

Social media has encouraged open conversations about many mental health issues, which is definitely a positive thing, and connecting with

others who share your struggle can be validating. The flip side is that quick video clips can oversimplify complicated issues—as is often the case with ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Once seen as a condition primarily affecting fidgeting boys, it's now recognized in more adult women. An estimate from the health data firm Epic Research says the percentage of young and middle-aged women newly diagnosed with the disorder nearly doubled from 2020 to 2022. Countless posts highlight the "hidden" symptoms that might indicate ADHD: constantly bumping into things, chronically running late, leaving cabinet doors open, daydreaming, being messy. It's tempting to self-diagnose based on a cluster of symptoms seen in a TikTok video, Hafeez says, because we have a natural urge to understand ourselves, and finding an explanation for our challenges can be a relief. Furthermore, once we're convinced we've discovered the explanation, we may fall prey to confirmation bias, the tendency to pay attention to evidence that supports our theory and disregard anything that doesn't.

If you're concerned, seek a full assessment by a trained clinician, such as a neuropsychologist, psychiatrist, neurologist, or psychologist. "Standardized neuropsychological testing is used to diagnose mental health conditions, and the process can take several months," Hafeez says. "Often clinicians discover that even if you do have ADHD, there may be other things going on—a learning or reading disability, depression, anxiety, or another mental health condition." So it's really in your best interest to see an expert.

THE MYTH: Your hormones need to be "balanced" (especially if you're in perimenopause).

THE DEBUNKER: Asima Ahmad, MD, MPH, ob-gyn, reproductive endocrinology and infertility specialist, and chief medical officer of the fertility platform Carrot @doctor_asima

The videos tend to follow a pattern: If you're experiencing [insert long list of symptoms here: insomnia, mood swings, fatigue...], your hormones are "imbalanced." Hormones may indeed be involved in what's ailing you, Ahmad says. "In some way, shape, or form, hormones affect every part of the body, including energy and mood, so it's not uncommon to have them evaluated as part of your workup if you're having unexplained symptoms." But since hormones can fluctuate throughout a person's life, "hormone imbalance" is a very broad term. Still, some so-called women's health experts will try to sell you an at-home hormone test or get you to take a hormone panel, then encourage you to buy supplements or begin therapy with compounded bioidentical (i.e., artificial) hormones, which aren't FDA-approved or recommended by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. "If someone is telling you to check your hormones and then selling you a quick-fix product that's profitable for them, be very wary, especially if they're not a board-certified physician," Ahmad warns. Discuss your symptoms with your primary care doctor or ob-gyn, who may refer you to a general or reproductive endocrinologist. If your concern specifically involves perimenopause or menopause, visit the North American Menopause Society site to search for a certified practitioner. ■

HOW TO SPOT SOCIAL MEDIA QUACKS

Influencers have gotten good—really good. They cite studies and quote doctors, which makes it challenging to decide who to trust. Here are a few telltale signs you may be getting misinformation.

THEY USE ABSOLUTE STATEMENTS
Researchers can't 100% guarantee that x, y, or z is causing or preventing anything, Steier says. "Science is an ongoing process, and as new evidence emerges, our understanding can evolve. Thoughtful posters should allow for uncertainty and nuances in scientific research."

THE RESEARCH CONTRADICTS SCIENTIFIC CONSENSUS
Watch out for people who present themselves as brave mavericks going against the grain. "You can always find a study to support a particular claim," Steier says, "but what does the overall research show?"

THEY AREN'T EXPERTS IN THE SUBJECT MATTER
Beware of health coaches pontificating about hormones, or "nutrition experts" who aren't registered dietitians. "If they're stepping outside their expertise, take what they say with a grain of salt," Steier says.

THEY'RE SELLING SOMETHING
If their entire post is meant to push a product, they may be biased, Steier warns. This doesn't necessarily mean they're sketchy—it just means you should look deeper into their claims and subject matter expertise before you hit "buy."