



## This cynical five-a-day myth: Nutrition expert claims we've all been duped

By **ZOE HARCOMBE**

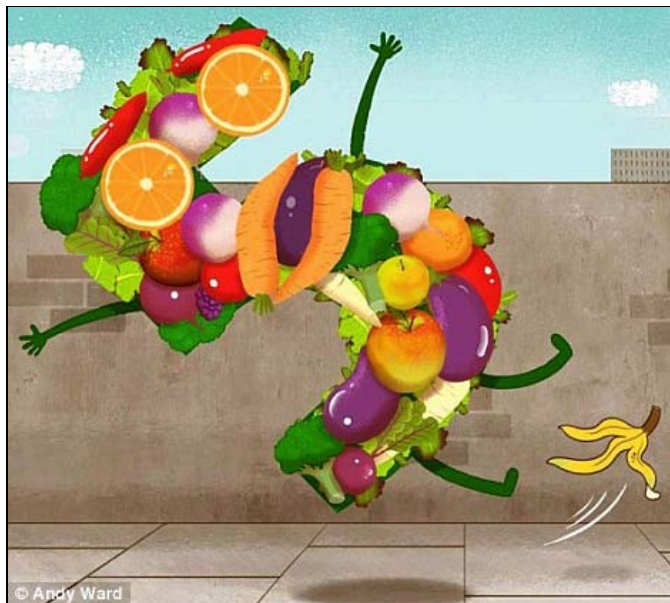
Last updated at 9:55 AM on 24th January 2011

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With great fanfare, it was reported last week that the current health advice about eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day is outdated, and that scientists now believe that eight portions is more beneficial.

While many people grumbled about how on earth they would manage those extra portions, I allowed myself a wry smile.

For more than two years I've known that the 'five-a-day' mantra we're all so familiar with is nothing but a fairytale.



Myth: The truth is that fruit and veg are pretty useless nutritionally

Of course, they are tasty, colourful additions to any meal. But in terms of health and nutrition, fruit and veg have little to offer, and telling us to eat eight portions a day is compounding one of the worst health fallacies in recent history.

Surprised? Many people will be, and no doubt some dieticians and nutritionists will reject my arguments. But science backs me up.

The latest findings come from a European study into diet and health looking at 300,000 people in eight countries.

It found that people who ate eight or more portions of fresh food a day had a 22 per cent lower chance of dying from heart disease. Yet just 1,636 participants died during the study from heart disease, which is about half of one per cent.

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Out of that very small proportion, fewer people died from the group that ate more fruit and veg.

However, the researchers cautioned that these people may have healthier lifestyles generally. They may be less likely to smoke; they may eat less processed food; they may be more active.

What we should not do is to make the usual bad science leap from association to causation and say 'eating more fruit and veg lowers the risk of dying from heart disease'.

This survey comes not long after another large study, which examined half a million people over eight years, reported that fruit and veg offer no protection against breast, prostate, bowel, lung or any other kind of tumour. Those eating the most fruit and veg showed no difference in cancer risk compared with those eating the least.

So how have we been duped for so long?

You might assume our five-a-day fixation is based on firm evidence. But you'd be wrong.

It started as a marketing campaign dreamt up by around 20 fruit and veg companies and the U.S. National Cancer Institute at a meeting in California in 1991. And it's been remarkably successful.

People in 25 countries, across three continents, have been urged to eat more greens, and have done so in their millions, believing it was good for them.

No doubt it was set up with the best intentions — to improve the health of the nation and reduce the incidence of cancer. But there was no evidence that it was doing us any good at all.

The fact that our own government has spent £3.3?million over the past four years on the five-a-day message shows how pervasive this belief is.

People are convinced that fruit and vegetables are a particularly good source of vitamins and minerals.

For a long time, I too was a believer. I was a vegetarian for 20 years. It is only after nearly two decades of my own research — I am a Cambridge graduate and currently studying for a PhD in nutrition — that I have changed my views.

The message that fruit and veg are pretty useless, nutritionally, gradually dawned on me.

The facts are these. There are 13 vitamins and fruit is good for one of them, vitamin C.

Vegetables offer some vitamins — vitamin C and the vegetable form of the fat-soluble vitamins A and vitamin K1 — but your body will be able to absorb these only if you add some fat, such as butter or olive oil.

The useful forms of A and K — retinol and K2 respectively — are found only in animal foods. As for minerals, there are 16 and fruit is good for one of them, potassium, which is not a substance we are often short of, as it is found in water.

Vegetables can be OK for iron and calcium but the vitamins and minerals in animal foods (meat, fish, eggs and dairy products) beat those in fruit and vegetables hands down. There is far more vitamin A in liver than in an apple, for instance.

But surely, people ask, even if there is no evidence that increasing our intake of fruit and vegetables will help prevent disease, they remain good things to eat?

I don't think so. If people try to add five portions of fruit and veg — let alone eight — a day to their diet, it can be counterproductive. Fruit contains high levels of fructose, or fruit sugar.

Among dieticians, fructose is known as 'the fattening carbohydrate'. It is not metabolised by the body in the same way as glucose, which enters the bloodstream and has a chance to be used for energy before it heads to the liver.

Vegetables offer some vitamins, but your body will be able to absorb these only if you add some fat, such as butter or olive oil



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Fructose goes straight to the liver and is stored as fat. Very few people understand or want to believe this biochemical fact.

Another argument that is often put forward by dieticians on behalf of fruit and vegetables is that they are 'a source of antioxidants'.

They believe we need to have more antioxidants in our diet to counteract the oxidants that damage the body's cells, either as a result of normal metabolic processes or as a reaction to environmental chemicals and pollutants.

But I would rather concentrate on not putting oxidants such as sugar, processed food, cigarette smoke or chemicals into my body.



Good to eat: But five a day is not necessarily helpful

Besides, fruit has a fraction of the antioxidants of coffee, though you rarely hear dieticians singing coffee's praises.

Incidentally, the body's natural antioxidant is vitamin E, which is found in seeds — and particularly sunflower seeds.

Another problem is that dieticians tell you to eat less fat. We're told that fat is bad for us but this has not been proven at all.

Of course, man-made trans-fats such as those found in biscuits and cakes are very unhealthy and should be banned.

But natural fats such as those in eggs, meat and fish should not be demonised alongside trans-fats. They are essential to our wellbeing and they are what we've lived on for thousands of years.

According to a recent survey, the British people are deficient in vitamins A, D, E — all of which are fat-soluble. If we added a dollop of butter to our portion of vegetables, they would be better for us — not worse.

Then there is the issue of fibre. Again, I don't agree with the prevailing view that we should all eat more fibre in order to help us feel full and keep our digestive systems moving.

The fact is, we can't digest fibre. How can something we can't even digest be so important to us, nutritionally?

We are told that we need to 'flush out' our digestive systems. But essential minerals are absorbed while food is in the intestines, so why do we want to flush everything out? It is far better to concentrate on not putting bad foods into your body.

The biggest tragedy of all is the lost opportunity from this misguided five-a-day campaign.

If only we had hand-picked the five foodstuffs that are actually most nutritious and spent what the Department of Health has spent on promoting fruit and vegetables over the past 20 years on recommending them, we could have made an enormous difference to the health and weight of our nation.

If you ask me, these foodstuffs are liver (good for all vitamins and packed with minerals), sardines (for vitamin D and calcium), eggs (all-round super-food with vitamins A, B, D, E and K, iron, zinc, calcium and more), sunflower seeds (magnesium, vitamin E and zinc) and dark-green vegetables such as broccoli or spinach (for vitamins C, K and iron).

Add milk (good for calcium, vitamins A and D), porridge oats (magnesium, zinc and B vitamins) and cocoa powder (magnesium and iron) and, hey presto, you're provided with the full quota of every vitamin and mineral our bodies need.

In a long-awaited Public Health White Paper late last year, Health Secretary Andrew Lansley said that only three in ten adults eat the recommended five-a-day.

Later in the same document, he asks how can we improve the use of evidence in public health. My suggestion is that he gets his own facts on five-a-day straight and saves himself the bother of worrying about fruit and veg.

**Essential minerals are absorbed while food is in the intestines, so why do we want to flush everything out? It is far better to concentrate on not putting bad foods into your body**

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The nation — and his budget — would thank him for it.

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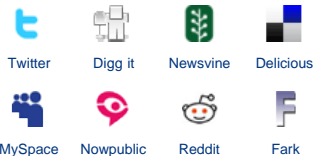
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What a completely biased and blinkered article. Fruit and veg only supply Vit C my a\*se! What about Lycopene in tomatoes - helping prevent prostate cancer, another anti-cancer agent - Sulphoraphane in broccoli, Phoridzin in apples helping prevent osteoporosis and daily apple consumption generally slowing Alzheimers and lowering LDL cholesterol, fighting lung cancer and reducing Insulin needs? What about Liminoid and Hesperidin in oranges - preventing mouth cancer and lowering blood pressure? I could go on but the point it, it's not all about vitamins, minerals, fats, carbs and protein. There are more and more micronutrients being discovered in fruit and veg all the time. Yes Zoe, coffee has recently been found to be full of antioxidants but it's also a diuretic, flushing out large percentages of any iron and water soluble Vitamins like B and C out in your urine. And fibre prevents high protein foods like meat sticking in the colon where it could rot and potentially cause cancer.

- Anthony, Forest Gate, 25/1/2011 15:01

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Your article made me source this research so that I could read it for myself (down loadable from pubmed) and I am struggling to see the point to your article which, if nothing else, gives misleading advice to people regarding what they should be eating. The EPIC (European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition) studies are highly valuable in determining dietary links to diseases. The authors quote "the results of the current study show that a higher consumption of fruits and vegetables is associated with a reduced risk of fatal ischaemic heart disease in this European population." They do not claim that eating 5 or even 8 portions daily will stop you dying, merely that the amount of fruit and vegetables you include in your diet correlates with your risk of dying from ischaemic heart disease. Anyway, I was under the impression that we we to try to consume 'at least' 5-day.

- Nina Bailey, Cambridge UK, 25/1/2011 13:52

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"Fresh fruit and veg" - how much is really fresh when it's been on the shelves for days, or in and out of cold storage? Most fruit is picked before maturity, so how much food value is really there? Also everybody's digestive system is different - mine can't cope with too much fibre, or liquid!

- carol dumousseau, Royan, France, 25/1/2011 13:04

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George London 25/01/011 Sorry I disagree, Fructose is of course (fruit sugar) your body does not treat natural fructose as a poison - your body uses it in the way it was designed to. The reason fruit sugar is good for you is that Fructose is broken down more slowly which allows the body more time to react to the sweetener that has been consumed. This puts less stress on the body and also the pancreas which is good news for diabetics as they too can have sweet tasting things but without the worry of a sudden sugar spike. I did not say the body didn't need fat of course it does but the

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