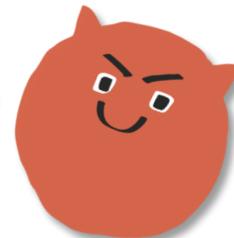




Health Halos & Horns

Rightful Reputations or Needless Notoriety?



We've all seen the ads, articles, and social media posts enticing us to try a new magic bullet or cautioning us about unsuspected dangers. Read on to learn more about frequently discussed health topics and how you can verify health claims for yourself.

Health Halos



Supplements

Americans spend more money on supplements (close to \$50 Billion/year) than they do on over-the-counter medications. They're generally taken either as a form of nutritional "insurance," in the hope that they lead to better health in some way, or for a specific purpose (to build muscle or boost immunity.)

But, not all supplements deserve their health halo. Supplements are not FDA-approved for safety or effectiveness, and there are no standards for combinations of ingredients or doses. Being a savvy supplement consumer means doing your homework first.



Superfoods

This is a marketing term with no scientific basis or regulatory definition. Foods with this label actually are often quite nutrient-dense, but they're also publicized as having health benefits above and beyond nutrition, or they're credited with the prevention of disease. These foods are frequently seen as being exotic in some way, and you'll almost always end up paying a premium for them.

In reality, all vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, peas, legumes, nuts, and seeds are foods that are super! Choose what you like and can afford, eat plenty of them, experiment with new ones when you can, and don't worry about the spendy stuff if you don't want to.

Check out a previous Topic of the Month, [Humble Heros](#), to learn more about the secret superpowers of everyday foods.



"Natural" Sweeteners

Ironically, sugar is both recognized as contributing to a variety of health issues and consumed in enormous quantities. Natural sweeteners claim to provide the sweetness we crave without the perceived dangers of sugar or artificial substitutes. But remember, there's no health advantage to consuming any type of added sugar, whether it's "natural" or not.

Take [agave nectar](#) for example. In the glow of its golden health halo, it's seen as being natural, unprocessed, and safer for people with diabetes. In reality, it's a highly processed food that has had any health benefits of the raw sap destroyed, while creating a sweetener that's nutritionally similar to high-fructose corn syrup. Like all sugars, it's best used only occasionally in small amounts.



Other not-so-healthy "health" foods

Food marketers of every stripe rely on health halos to sell products. Watch out for:

- *Snack bars* — Whether granola, protein, or energy bars, these are usually just camouflaged candy. Be careful! Even those featuring whole grains and fruits can be sugar bombs.
- *Granola and other breakfast cereals* — Mix oats, fruit, nuts, and seeds and you've got a tasty source of important nutrients. Drench it in sugar, and you've got dessert disguised as breakfast.
- *Yogurt* — Advertised as being a source of gut-healthy probiotics, it can be a nutritious choice. If you're not careful, though, it can also often be a source of spoonfuls of sugar.
- *Whole-grain bread* — Unless the very first ingredient is "100% whole ____," it's really a package of white bread.

Click [here](#) for more information on less-than-healthy foods that are hiding behind their halos.

Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We're here to help!
Ask a nurse or provider if you'd like to talk. 218-387-2330

Health halos aren't the only inaccuracies that we need to watch out for. Undeserved "health horns" can create unnecessary concerns. We can end up wasting time and energy avoiding things that are harmless, or worse yet, needlessly shunning things that can actually be helpful.

Health Horns



Processed Food

In the age of "[clean eating](#)," processed food can get a bad rap. The vast majority of food that we eat needs to be processed in some way: cut, cooked, canned, fortified, frozen, etc. None of these steps necessarily decrease nutrient content. In fact, in some cases, [processing](#) can preserve or free up nutrients that would otherwise be unavailable to our bodies.

However, there's a big difference between processed whole food and "[ULTRA-Processed](#)" food (UPF). UPF contains little or no whole food and is made primarily from edible substances that have been extracted, derived, or synthesized from other foods, such as fats and hydrogenated fats, starches, and added sugars. They often also contain additives such as artificial colors and flavors or stabilizers. Consumption of ultra-processed foods has been linked to higher rates of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, depression, cancer, kidney, and liver diseases. Frighteningly, more than 60% of the food that Americans eat now falls into the ultra-processed category. In this case, the "health horns" on ultra-processed foods are entirely justified.



Chemicals

Everything we eat, drink, touch, taste, smell, or see is made up of chemicals. "[Chemical-free](#)" anything is [impossible](#). What marketers want us to ignore is the fact that regardless of where a chemical comes from, its properties are the same. That's why synthesized [Vitamin C](#) works, and is, the same as the Vitamin C from an orange.

"Natural" (and how is that even defined?) is not always safer, gentler, or more effective, and manufactured is not always inferior, dangerous, or harsh. Medications and [vaccinations](#) can be prime examples of human-created, life-saving substances. The "[appeal to nature](#)" tactic can be used to put health horns on lots of things that are really very safe. Consider...



Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)

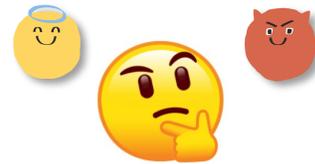
MSG is a flavor-enhancing additive that people have been undeservedly [trash-talking](#) for over 50 years. It's made from an amino acid that occurs naturally in foods such as meat, tomatoes, and cheese. It provides umami—a rich, savory taste. Decades of [research](#) have proven it to be a safe way to increase flavor while decreasing overall sodium content.

Our food is not the only place where "health horns" can mistakenly sway us. Substances that we put on and in our bodies can be inaccurately perceived too. For instance...



Aluminum

Many "natural" deodorants are prominently labeled as being aluminum-free. Concern sprang from one study done in the 1960s that has never been replicated. In fact, there is no data that supports any health risks associated with [aluminum in deodorants](#). Why? Because the aluminum just temporarily plugs sweat glands. It can't be absorbed into or impact your body in any way.



How to spot the health halos and horns.

(Or... learning how to cut the CRAAP)

CRAAP is an acronym that can help us to wade through all kinds of confusing information by examining:

- Currency**—How current is the information? Some data doesn't change much over time but some changes rapidly.
- Relevancy**—Does the information meet your needs? Have you checked several sources to find accurate answers?
- Authority**—Who is the source of the information? What are the qualifications and credentials of the source?
- Accuracy**—Is the information backed up with solid evidence and can you find the sources of that evidence?
- Purpose**—Why does this information exist? To inform, teach, sell, entertain, or persuade?

To learn more about CRAAP and other ways you can protect yourself by separating health facts from health fiction, read a past TOM, "[Informational Winnowing](#)."