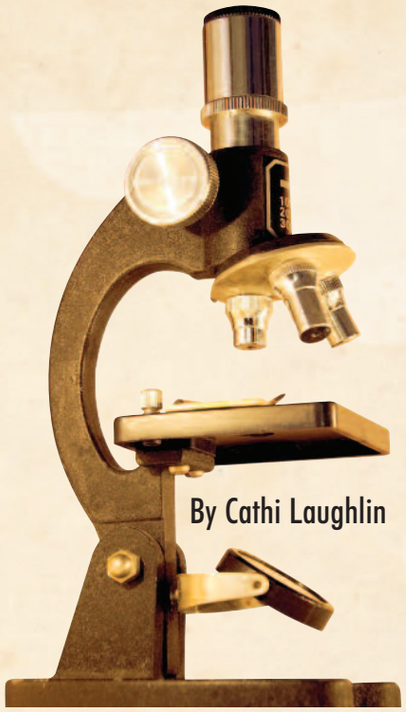
Putting Medical Myths Under the Microscope

What Medical Myths Do You Wonder About? Local Top Docs Set the Record Straight



By Cathi Laughlin

You asked - we listened! Our readers responded to the question: "What medical myths do you wonder about?" Then we turned to four of the area's top docs for the answers.

Stanley Goldfarb, MD FACP, FASN, Assoc. Dean, Penn School of Medicine and author of "Just Add Water," a water consumption study published in the June 2008 Journal of the American Society of Nephrology.

Q: Do we really need 8 glasses of water each day?

A: The bottom line of our study was to relieve people of this mythic burden. As long as they're (physically and mentally) healthy and living in a temperate environment, nobody should think they need more water than their thirst guides them to drink.

Q: Is coffee bad for the kidneys?

A: Coffee has no adverse affect. It does not produce dehydration.

Q: Is bottled water better?

A: There's no evidence that bottled is better than tap. It's marketing that says that water drunk from the bottle is better.

Naomi Lawrence, MD, Director, Dermatology Surgery, Cooper University Hospital

Q: Do the over-the-counter anti-wrinkle, anti-aging products really work? How about the product Freeze?

A: The most researched topical creams which improve the quality of skin and fine lines are retinoids. They've been found to reduce fine wrinkles and skin roughness by increasing epidermal thickness and stimulating collagen. Also, alpha-hydroxy creams exfoliate and hydrate the skin, causing a decrease in the appearance of fine lines.

Many products make sensational claims that they can improve the skin. Freeze is a product being marketed as a 'topical Botox.' The active ingredient is a Chinese herb. There is no scientific evidence that it works.

Q: Do skin abrasion systems work?

A: These systems mildly exfoliate the outer surface of the skin. Their effect is limited but may improve the quality of skin tone.

Q: Do dieting and exercise get rid of cellulite?

A: Not really. Cellulite is caused by fat deposits that push through the connective tissues beneath the skin which lead to irregular contour changes on the surface of the skin. Dieting and exercise can improve muscle tone and decrease fat, but do not necessarily eliminate cellulite.

Michelle Iavicoli, MD, Head, Division of General OB/GYN, Cooper University Hospital

Q: Is the blood test CA 125 the definitive test for ovarian cancer?

A: The CA 125 test is a blood test that determines the level of an antigen in the blood which is known to be a tumor marker. It is commonly used to monitor the state of the disease in ovarian cancer patients because 80%-90% of women with ovarian cancer in its later stages will have signs of the antigen in their blood.

Unfortunately, the test is not as sensitive as would be ideal, leading to many 'false positive' and 'false negative' results. Pelvic ultrasounds are a safe, noninvasive way to examine the ovaries and possibly detect a cancer mass.

Q: Douching: good or bad?

A: Medical research shows that normal bacteria in the vagina maintains balance and protects against invasive bacteria. Douching can wipe out the good bacteria.

Q: Do all women have hot flashes?

A: No. We don't know why some women have hot flashes while others never do. A hot flash is a rapid onset of heat and flushing that starts from the chest and radiates to the head. It usually occurs during the decline in ovarian function.

Q: Can you catch a venereal disease by using a public restroom?

A: No. Most sexually transmitted diseases are spread by contact.

Auguste P. Turnier, MD Gastroenterologist, Virtua Health, New Jersey

Q: Does chewing gum stay in the stomach for seven years?

A: No. In a normal intestinal tract, the food that you swallow will usually pass from your mouth to your bottom in around 12 to 24 hours.

Q: Is Irritable Bowel Syndrome psychosomatic?

A: Not really. The underlying problem is in the belly, but your state of mind can definitely influence how you feel. Some factors such as fatty foods, spicy foods, caffeine or stress can aggravate the problem.

Q: Does turkey make you tired because it has tryptophan?

A: Yes and no. Turkey does contain tryptophan, an amino acid which can make you sleepy, but no more than any other meats and cheeses. Eating a lot of carbohydrates like breads and desserts associated with the Thanksgiving dinner will cause biochemical changes that lead to enhanced absorption of tryptophan which will lead to that drowsy state.

Q: If you cut down on your food intake, will your stomach eventually shrink?

A: Not really. Your stomach is a large muscular sack that distends easily when filled with solid food, liquid or gas. If you reduce your caloric intake consistently for a few weeks, often your body readjusts and allows you to feel full with less intake of food. Many people misinterpret that feeling as a shrinking of the stomach size.

Q: Do you need a colonoscopy even if you aren't having any problems?

A: Yes. Your colon is about five feet long. It carries stool from your small intestine to your rectum. Colon cancer can occur anywhere along its length. It begins as a small non-cancerous growth called a polyp, no bigger than a pimple or a pea. Over time, these polyps can grow larger and eventually transform into cancer. Colonoscopies are performed to find these polyps and remove them before they have a chance to become malignant. g

Weigh in on future Girlfriendz opinion polls. Sign up for our e-mail newsletter at www.girlfriendzmag.com.

Cathi Laughlin has written for publications in the South Jersey and Philadelphia areas, and for online travel sites highlighting places she and her family have visited. She's worked in the public relations and tourism industries for many years, and now writes from her Riverton, New Jersey home, where she lives with her husband, Jerry, and her four children.