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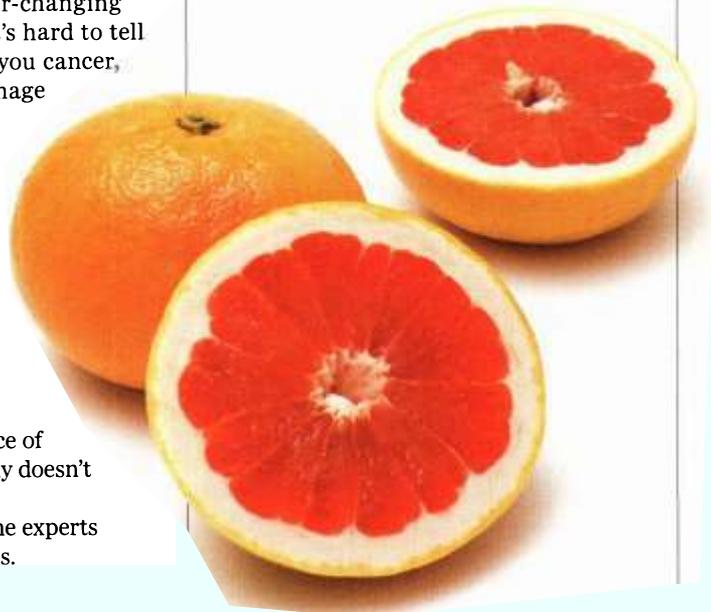
Myth busters

We give 10 popular health claims a reality check.

KNOWING WHAT IS GOOD for you may seem daunting, with the endless and ever-changing stream of health claims. It's hard to tell what will apparently give you cancer, protect you against it, damage your heart, cleanse your body, boost your immune system or help you lose weight.

Some of these health messages have become folklore but do they stack up? Some are just untrue, many are built on suspicions since disproved, and all lack conclusive scientific results. That said, an absence of proof that something is risky doesn't necessarily mean it's safe.

The Bulletin canvassed the experts on 10 common health claims.



1 Drink eight glasses of water a day.

There's no scientific backing for this oft-cited rule, which has seen the water bottle become a ubiquitous accessory. It's such a popular myth it was endorsed by Kidney Health Australia (KHA), until it reviewed the policy about five years ago and discovered a "distinct lack of evidence".

The origin of "8x8" - eight glasses of eight ounces (240mL) - is unclear, although a potential suspect is a 1974 book by American nutritionist Dr Frederick J. Stare.

KHA medical director Dr Tim Mathew says the best rule is drink when you're thirsty, and choose water. You can use the colour of your urine as a guide - pale amber is good, darker means you're dehydrated.

2 Foods like grapefruit, vinegar and chilli burn fat.

No foods can burn fat. Talk of a fat-burning enzyme in grapefruit, for example, isn't backed by evidence. Some foods, like chilli and caffeine, increase your metabolic rate briefly but not enough to have any real effect, says Nutrition Australia.

Grapefruit is a healthy food, so include it in your diet (although it can interact with some medications) but any single-food regime, like the Grapefruit Diet reportedly favoured by celebrities such as Brooke Shields, is a bad idea.

3 Excessive mobile phone use will give you a brain tumour.

There's no increased risk in people who have used their mobile for less than 10 years, but the jury is still out on longer-term use.

Cancer Council CEO Professor Ian Olver says inconsistent findings for mobile phone use over more than a decade mean that more investigation is needed - a Danish study found no link to increased cancer rates but Swedish research suggested





potential risk. Results generally aren't broken down for heavy versus infrequent mobile users, or for hands-free devices.

Proving such a link is difficult because it's likely most cancers are caused by a combination of factors. Olver says there's yet to be a convincing argument on how mobile phone radiation could cause the DNA disruption necessary for cancer to develop.

4 Vitamin C stops you getting a cold.

Despite widespread use of the vitamin for this purpose, a Cochrane Review this year concluded that there's not much point.

The results of 30 trials showed that taking vitamin C supplements (orally, 0.2g+) makes almost no difference to whether you get a cold, unless you're doing extreme exercise and/or in very cold temperatures (marathon runners, skiers, soldiers on sub-arctic exercises).

Taking vitamin C before the cold can cut its duration, but after you have symptoms it makes no significant difference. Severity isn't affected.

5 Artificial sweeteners are carcinogenic.

This concern arose when studies in rats found that high doses of saccharin, the oldest artificial sweetener, caused bladder stones, which can lead to bladder cancer.

But Dr David Thomas, an oncologist from the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, says that most of the associations made between sweeteners and cancer in humans have been technically flawed.

"There have been quite a number of reasonably powered association studies, and overall I don't think there is any evidence that any form of sweetener is associated with increased cancer risk," he says.

6 Tomatoes and oranges put you at risk of arthritis.

Nutrition Australia says this myth stems from the idea that acidic foods will accumulate in the blood and eat away at the body's joints.

"Arthritis is not caused by eating acidic foods," it says. "Very few foods are as acidic as our digestive juices. Foods termed 'acid foods', such as tomatoes and oranges, are very rich in vitamin C, which is beneficial to the immune system, so avoiding these may do more harm than good," it says.

Spokeswoman Aloysa Hourigan says that some people with arthritis will be intolerant of certain foods, but a balanced diet is recommended.

7 Excessive coffee will give you a heart attack.

Four cups of coffee or fewer a day won't affect your cardiovascular health, according to a recent International Food Information Centre paper, but there is less data about the effects of much higher amounts.

The National Heart Foundation says a

moderate amount of instant and filtered coffee is considered safe but some preparation methods, such as boiling ground coffee beans for long periods, may result in higher cholesterol.

The American Heart Association concludes that for most people a couple of cups a day doesn't appear to be harmful.

8 Sunscreen protects you from skin cancer.

No sunscreen offers 100% protection, even if you follow the instructions to the letter, says the Cancer Council NSW. You generally need to cover up with clothing, a hat, and shade.



It's also a myth that you're safe so long as you don't get burnt - any tanning represents cell damage by UV radiation and increases cancer risk.

Some sun exposure is needed to get adequate vitamin D, but the Cancer Council recommends short bursts only outside the peak UV times of 10am-2pm.

9 Special diets or products are necessary in order to detox your body.

Your body is perfectly capable of detoxing itself. "Detox diets often encourage severe restriction of whole food groups, such as meat or dairy food, making it difficult to meet nutritional needs," says the Dietitians Association of Australia.

"The scientific basis for these kinds of stringent diets is lacking and such severe dietary restriction is unnecessary and potentially dangerous."

While some people report feeling better after "detox diets", it's often because they're eating less unhealthy food, drinking less alcohol and consuming more fruit and vegetables.



10 Don't cross your legs or you'll get varicose veins.

Australasian College of Phlebology spokesman Dr Adrian Lim says genetics are the main factor and there's no known way to prevent varicose veins if you're predisposed.

However, the risk can be reduced through support stockings, maintaining a normal weight, regular exercise, avoiding constipation and shunning high heels. Obesity, pregnancy and prolonged standing also increase the risk.

Crossing your legs can, however, speed the development of varicose veins if you're at risk or already have them. ●

