

Uncovering the truth behind nutritional studies

Written by Special to the NNPA from The Atlanta Voice
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(Family Features) Do you often feel confused by the multitude of sensational nutrition studies in the media? When it comes to feeding your family, being able to break down the scientific research process to make informed nutrition choices is essential.

Conflicting information

It's only natural to wonder about nutrition studies mentioned in headlines. One moment a study recommends eating fish or butter and not long after that, another study contradicts the very thing we just added to our grocery cart.

"As consumers hungry for good health, it's easy to get caught up in and sometimes discouraged by studies that promise the newest improve-your-health food," said Carolyn O'Neil, a registered dietitian for Best Food Facts. "Who among us doesn't want to feel and look better as a result of eating? With headlines promising miracle results, and then those promises don't work out, it's easy to get discouraged."

Understanding the process

Rather than doubting yourself, O'Neil advises to better understand the research process behind the headlines. The next time you read one that touts the next food trend, you'll be able to decipher whether it's a good option for your family.

"Just because you read it in the paper doesn't mean you should change your eating habits overnight, because that's not the way we in science typically operate," explained Dr. Michael Doyle, director of the Center for Food Safety at the University of Georgia.

Steps for quality research

These are the three main steps for conducting thorough research. Along with being peer reviewed and published, research that fits within these categories is recognized as the gold standard.

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Transparency: Reliable research includes communication that's honest, open and easy to understand.

Reproducibility: Different scientific researchers participate in studies that come to the same conclusion.

Meta-Analysis: There is an ability to contrast and combine results from different studies to look for differences or agreement.

If these three steps cannot be successfully completed, testing will continue until multiple scientists determine the same result. Unfortunately this kind of process promises no immediate results. This is yet another reason why it's important to take those in-your-face nutritional studies with a grain of salt until further studies are completed.

Further review

Once a study successfully meets the steps of transparency and reproducibility, the research is turned over to scientists who were not involved in the initial research for an independent evaluation. These scientists perform a meta-analysis, contrasting and combining results from different studies and looking for differences or agreement. Only after going through this process can research be considered scientifically verified.

If you don't have time to dig deeper into the research, O'Neil recommends visiting www.BestFoodFacts.org, a website featuring information from more than 170 university-based food system experts with blogs, infographics and videos on all things food.