

The 10 worst health stories of 2018 (part 1)



'Tis the season—of lists. Best books, best films, best consumer electronics, best cat videos... *ad nauseum!*

This week and next, I'm flipping the script to recap the ten *worst* health stories of 2018. And, boy, this year has offered a bumper crop! Here are my choices:

1. Low-carb diets increase your risk of dying: A *Lancet* study launched a myriad of copycat headlines like this one from Medscape—"Low-carb diet may up odds for an early death". I was prompted to demolish it in this podcast.

The study is riddled with flaws. It relies on the faulty memory of what participants ate over 25 years, checked infrequently; the "low-carb" diet wasn't really low-carb—study participants consumed 40% of their calories as carbs; and the paper failed to account for the fact that people who eat more meat may tend to consume more processed junk and be less health-oriented overall. A more detailed critique can be found [here](#).

Was there a political agenda behind the article? An article in *Scientific American* speculates that it may represent the nutrition establishment's pushback against mounting criticism of obsolete guidelines that continue to urge people to consume copious amounts of "healthy" grains, starchy vegetables and low-fat foods.

2. Probiotics don't work and can give you brain fog: A journal study entitled "Brain fogginess, gas and bloating: a link between SIBO, probiotics and metabolic acidosis" suggested that taking probiotics could make you spacey. The subjects stopped the probiotics and felt better. But the authors stacked the deck by selecting patients who already had SIBO (small intestine bacterial overgrowth) and didn't just stop their probiotics—they sterilized their GI tracts with antibiotics! No wonder subjects got better, and nowhere is it demonstrated that probiotics caused their brain fog, as I explain in [this post](#).

Then, a subsequent study showed that, for many, probiotics don't "take" and properly colonize the GI tracts of regular consumers, generating headlines like "Probiotics are a waste of money". But never do the authors of the study claim that probiotics are worthless. In fact they explicitly state: "*Our study is not aimed or powered to assess the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of probiotics in ameliorating post-antibiotics clinical symptoms.*"

I enumerate the paper's shortcomings here and take issue not so much with the researchers, but with the irresponsible clickbait journalists who twisted their

findings to generate spurious headlines.

3. Fish oil pills are a waste of money: “Another nail in the coffin for fish oil supplements” breathlessly exults an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* this year. A subsequent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed no heart benefits of fish oil supplements for diabetic patients, but the researchers for some reason low-balled the dosage to one capsule per day, and further blundered by using olive oil capsules as placebos! Few noticed that the fish oil group suffered 25% fewer cardiovascular deaths, but this was deemed not statistically significant.

Meanwhile, news of the positive results of the REDUCE-IT trial sent stocks of Amarin Pharmaceuticals soaring when it was found that its prescription Omega-3 Vascepa curbed cardiovascular events—by 25%. They used higher doses (4 caps/day) and the product was a patented synthetic esterified EPA, prompting Amarin to warn fish oil manufacturers that they’d face legal action if they appropriated REDUCE-IT’s results to support fish oil supplement sales.

I addressed this seeming double standard here.

4. Cancer patients who use alternative medicine die sooner: This Yale study was widely touted as a repudiation of alternative therapies for cancer. But it was based on a very tiny fraction of patients using complementary and alternative medicine for cancer—258 out of a sample of over 1.9 million cancer patients. But that’s hardly representative of the high percentage of cancer patients—sometimes estimated at 60%—who utilize natural therapies as an *adjunct* to conventional cancer treatment.

This tiny group represents extreme “refuseniks”—individuals with cancers highly amenable to standard treatments with surgery, radiation, chemo- or immunotherapy. They irrationally chose to forego potential cures, relying instead entirely on an unspecified array of possibly inefficacious “alternatives.” It’s a no-brainer that they tended to do worse. But even so, results for certain cancers, like prostate, were comparable.

This study, while it purports to address CAM—complementary and alternative medicine—cancer therapies, really has nothing to say about a truly complementary or integrative approach to cancer that responsibly blends the best elements of naturally-based and high-tech oncology options.

5. Keto diets are dangerous and ineffective: True to form, *U.S. News* published its annual review of diets and rated the low-carb ketogenic diet dead-last, reflecting an ongoing bias against saturated fats and carb restriction. By contrast, the DASH diet, replete with starchy whole grains, sugary fruits, and bland low-fat dairy, earned a #1.

While much of the popular press dutifully echoed *U.S. News*’ ratings, they received a thoughtful challenge in an op-ed penned by staunch low-carb defenders Gary Tauber and Nina Teicholz.

They said: “It’s clear that *U.S. News*, which employed an expert panel to rate 40 diets on various criteria, merely recapitulated questionable dietary advice that has gone by a succession of names since the 1970s — “low-fat,” “DASH,” “USDA-style,” “plant-based.” The basic set of recommendations has remained the same, emphasizing plant foods (grains, cereals, fruits and vegetables) over animal products (eggs, regular dairy, meat), and vegetable oils over natural animal fats such as butter.”

In so doing, *U.S. News* simply doubles-down on outmoded dietary advice that has

proven counter-productive in stemming tide of the degenerative diseases that result from carbohydrate-driven metabolic syndrome. Preliminary research is demonstrating the safety and efficacy of the Keto diet in reversing Type 2 diabetes, America's biggest looming health crisis. Here are some Keto Facts compiled by Nina Teicholz.

For the rest of my year-end blooper reel of bad health stories of 2018, stay tuned for next week's installment.