

Top Ten worst health stories of 2019 (Part 1)



It's that time of year again! Time to pay homage to some of the worst accomplishments of waning 2019: Worst songs, worst movies, worst fashions, worst tech gifts, etc.

This week, I'm reprising my annual rendition of the year's worst health stories (see my picks for 2018 here).

These stories distinguish themselves by perpetuating stereotypes about the dangers or inefficacy of supplements or natural therapies, or alternatively, parroting outmoded concepts about diet.

Here are the first five:

EAT Lancet: This February, the United Nations, in conjunction with the *Lancet* medical journal, announced with great fanfare its "EAT Lancet" report. It envisions a plant-based diet, virtually bereft of animal protein and replete with grains and processed polyunsaturated oils, as a comprehensive solution to the problems of skyrocketing obesity and degenerative disease, as well as saving the planet from the perils of climate change. But its assumptions are faulty, as I pointed out in an article earlier this year ("Nutrition community to Lancet: EAT this!"). Not surprisingly, processed food conglomerates are all in on EAT Lancet, foreseeing a profit bonanza from highly-processed "virtuous" foods made from cheap "plant-based" ingredients. Hold your nose and eat them, because they're (supposedly) good for the environment!

Take more statins: Notwithstanding evidence that cholesterol-lowering drugs aren't much good for folks over 75 *Harvard Health* published an article "Study supports benefits of statin use for older adults". Their assertion is based on a study which seems to exonerate statins as a cause of memory loss in seniors. Nevertheless, statin drugs' prescribing information is required to carry a black box warning that some older individuals may experience memory problems when taking the meds. This makes sense because the brain is composed largely of cholesterol, and persons with low cholesterol are more likely to suffer depression and suicide.

Fish oil supplements are no good: *Scientific American*—a usually reliable source—published an article claiming fish oil supplements were ineffective. The author—R. Preston Mason—opines "After decades of promises that they 'may work' to reduce cardiovascular disease, the lack of a demonstrated benefit leads me to conclude that consumers are wasting their money." (Source)

But in an embarrassing omission, it was later revealed that Mason has a fiduciary relationship as a researcher on 10 studies underwritten by Amarin Pharmaceuticals,

the makers of a prescription fish oil which directly competes with over-the-counter fish oil supplements! I address the controversy over fish oil supplements' benefits in this article in which I highlight a new study which vindicates their efficacy: "Fish oil supplements are good. No, worthless. Wait—they work!"

Supplements worthless: "Study Finds No Benefit for Dietary Supplements" proclaims a story from earlier this year. It's based on an analysis of survey data gathered from more than 27,000 people over a six-year period, that showed that those taking supplements had about the same risk of dying as those who got their nutrients from food alone. While disappointing, it's a little like claiming *all* prescription medications are worthless based on a study showing that those who take drugs die at about the same rate as those who don't (which they probably do!). What supplements were the subjects taking? Of what quality? Are we to take their word that they were faithfully taking supplements based on the notoriously inaccurate recall questionnaires they were asked to fill out?

Actually, initially, the vitamin takers were found to fare better, but after a statistical adjustment was made to account for their superior diets and exercise and smoking avoidance, they appeared to enjoy no advantage over their matched peers. Data massage much? The study's conclusion that supplements are worthless is unacceptably broad and belied by thousands of research papers that show advantages of supplementation for prevention and reversal of a myriad of health conditions.

Dangerous complementary cancer treatments: *The Independent* newspaper in the UK ran an article this year highlighting the potential for natural cancer treatments to interfere with conventional therapies. It claimed "There is no evidence that any alternative treatments can improve cancer survival," and repeated the canard that cancer patients who use alternatives are twice as likely to die as those who do not.

The Independent article is based on a study in *Nature Oncology* that found that a third of cancer patients utilize alternative therapies, usually not to the exclusion of conventional care, but sometimes without informing their oncologists. While the potential for harmful interactions is real, well-trained integrative practitioners can successfully and safely introduce compatible complementary modalities to mitigate the side effects of conventional therapies while boosting their efficacy. Listen to a podcast I recently did with Lise Alschuler ND, author of *The Definitive Guide to Cancer*.

The irony is that, while those vaunted conventional cancer therapies have made some great strides lately, cancer has now eclipsed heart disease as the major cause of death in the U.S., and new "breakthrough" cancer drugs extend life for mere months with little impact on ultimate survival, while often causing severe side effects, and cost tens of thousands of dollars per course of treatment.

I'll share more of the Worst Health Stories of 2019 with you in Part 2, next week. Stay tuned!