

From: Mark Hyman, MD admin@longevityfilm.com  
Subject: Tips for understanding nutrition science  
Date: Aug 31, 2021 at 9:06:53 AM  
To: Gail gailrankin6@gmail.com



Hi Gail,

When I was in medical school, I thought that science was a beautiful, pristine field full of integrity and truth. But as I've paid closer attention, I've discovered that many nutrition studies are highly corrupted by the food industry. The food industry also buys loyalty from a wide range of prominent organizations we believe to be credible and independent sources of advice.

**Did you know that the American Heart Association (AHA) gets money from cereal makers to put its seal of approval on the packages and receives hundreds of thousands of dollars for each "endorsement"? Twix is heart-healthy according to the AHA, in case you weren't aware—and so is French Toast Crunch, right along with the 7 teaspoons of sugar per serving. It shouldn't be called breakfast; it should be called morning dessert.**

Now, to be fair, when products like Coca-Cola and Skittles were created, it may be true that the manufacturers didn't know just how much obesity and disease their products would cause. But this is no longer the case. Big Food companies are not innocent actors; they are active participants. Rather than changing or reinventing their products to be less harmful, Big Food manipulates science and distorts the truth.

## How to Discern What's Legit

For consumers, you have to be hyper-aware. When you see a company touting the health benefits of its products, there's a good chance that the claim came from a dubious study that was wholly bought and paid for by a food company. Or when you see studies casting doubt on the harmful effects of their products, don't believe those either. Before you buy into a headline or the latest study, do the following:

**1. Read the fine print.** Who paid for the study? For example, if it's a study on breakfast cereal and weight gain, did the National Institute of Health (NIH) fund it or did Kellogg's? As Vani Hari says in her book *Feeding You Lies*, "You wouldn't believe a study on cigarettes that was funded by Philip Morris, and you probably shouldn't believe a study on cereal paid for by a company whose bottom line depends on Froot Loops, Apple Jacks, and Frosted Flakes."

**2. Dig a little deeper.** If a study says it is funded by the International Life Sciences Institute, you may feel relieved. Sounds legit. But Google the organization. See who is behind it. Turns out that ILSI is a front group founded by a Coca-Cola executive; its sponsors include General Mills, Hershey Foods, Kellogg's, Kraft, McDonald's, Merck & Co., Nestlé, PepsiCo, Procter & Gamble.

**3. Find out what kind of study it is.** Observational study or randomized controlled trial? Observational studies look for associations and inferred correlations; they collect observations for a hypothesis. The purpose of observational studies is quite simple: to generate hypotheses for future research, and to assess whether correlations are real or just noise. They never prove cause and effect.

The studies that I put more faith in are large randomized controlled trials, which are true experiments. In a typical randomized trial, scientists manipulate one variable, such as sugar intake, and then assign people to different groups where they are exposed to high levels of sugar or low levels of sugar. Then researchers follow them and measure things like changes in their body weight, cardiovascular biomarkers, and appetite. This is how good science is done. A randomized controlled trial can prove cause and effect. An observational study

cannot.

Many of our dietary guidelines and health recommendations are based on what is known as nutritional epidemiology, which relies on observational studies that are weak and easily manipulated. Large observational studies also gave us the disastrous advice to eat low-fat diets and six to eleven servings of bread, rice, cereal, and pasta every day!

**4. Remember that replication is the cornerstone of good science.** One study that claims that soft drinks are not linked to weight gain should not distract you from the fact that dozens of independent studies have found otherwise. If one sensational new study contradicts a large body of research and sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. If a study reveals a new finding, wait to see what other research comes out to confirm or deny it.

Now you know what's really behind all those confusing reports. The fine print reveals who is funding a study and how the data might be manipulated for profit rather than for your health. So the next time a headline catches your attention, be wary, be thoughtful, and dig a little.

Wishing you health and happiness,  
Mark Hyman, MD

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