

Advice from the Trenches: I'm Confused!



Dear C,

I am confused. Every time I watch a news show or read the paper, there's another headline about what science has discovered is good, or bad, for you. I remember when coffee was the great evil — now they say it's okay. Then fat was bad for you, and fat free foods were all the rage. Now I hear that it's dangerous to take fats out of my diet and that fat-free foods are loaded with sugar.

I don't feel like I can trust any of it.

What The?

Dear What,

You are right to have a healthy distrust. Making decisions on personal health based on headlines and news segments is like writing a review of a movie based on the promotional trailers. What you get is a synopsis of the most sensational elements, without context or storyline.

When it comes to your body, context and storyline are what matters. The context is your own body, the storyline is the long-term effect of every treatment or indulgence. The general information that is thrown out in the media should be a starting point for understanding, not a conclusion. If you want to know how this information applies to YOU, you have to do some research.

Let's remember that the media is not just there to inform — it is also there to bolster the big business that finances its operations. Yes, some very important medical facts that are relevant to all of us DO get some airplay. But if a subject on health is getting prime time hype on national networks, someone, somewhere, probably stands to make a great deal of money if you buy into it.

Another reason to question information is that science often finds that a drug initially hailed as a miracle cure can have long-term effects that are more deadly than the original problem. Tamoxifen is a great example. For many years, doctors regarded it as a breast cancer survivor's best chance to stay in remission. Later on it was discovered that long-term use could cause an even more deadly type of cervical cancer. There's a long list of drugs that had to be recalled. I was prescribed Zomax for a chronic condition. At first it seemed like the answer to my prayers. Later, it was taken off the market because it had killed a dozen people and was found to cause cancer. So much for FDA-approved pharmaceutical trials.

We are all different machines. Each one of us has different genetics, different environmental factors that affect our reactions, even entirely different bacterial cultures living in our guts. When it comes to our health, one size does not fit all. Some people practically explode with jitters if they drink a single cup of coffee. For others, coffee can stave off depression or lower their risk of Type II Diabetes. Which brings me to ...

Pay attention to the messages from your body. Far more accurately than the news, your own body will tell you just about everything you need to know if you are willing to listen. I was at a party the other week listening to a woman who had been tentatively diagnosed with "suspected IBD" (inflammatory bowel disease). She was lamenting about her condition and hoping they'd find some pills that worked because she'd always loved fast food burgers, but every time she ate them now, she got sick. She wanted the doctors to fix it so she could eat whatever she wanted. When I gently suggested that her body might be trying to give her a message that she shouldn't be eating that stuff, she was affronted. "What do I pay the doctor for?" was her immediate retort. I know better than to try to give advice to people who don't want it, so I shut up. Later, I watched her down three burgers in a row, then run for the bathroom and retch her guts out. Sigh.

We would all like to believe that there is a magic bullet or miracle cure that will solve our problems. The truth can be a lot less glamorous. Take those sensational organ transplants that we all regard now as life saving "cures." In reality, the immunosuppressive medications that transplant recipients take to keep them from rejecting their new organs can make them more susceptible to later stage cancers that are harder to cure. Transplant recipients are four times more likely to be diagnosed with regional stage melanoma, and far more often die of it. And that's just ONE of the complications.

So, yeah. Be suspicious. Ask questions. And trust your own body. It's smarter than you think.