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Don't Always Believe The Food Hype

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

I HAVE NO patience for the ever-changing whims of the fashion world. To anyone who sees how I dress on a regular basis, this will come as no surprise. I don't look down on those who follow sartorial trends, who must always have the next "it" bag or the next hot shoes, but I just can't be bothered.

And yet, when it comes to food trends, I'm a complete sucker. I buy into the hype, tossing aside items no longer in vogue and stocking up on new finds, assuming they must somehow be healthier, or taste better, than what came before. I don't do this consciously, but I do it nonetheless.

As a food writer, and therefore a member of a larger media conglomerate, I suppose I'm guilty of perpetrating this type of trend-spreading as well. I trust my own research, though, so I don't feel foolish buying flaxseed (for the omega 3s) or pomegranate juice (for the antioxidants); after all, several large studies have borne out these foods as particularly good for us. But for every sound study there are numerous dubious ones, and it's not always easy to tell the wheat from the chaff.

Take this beauty, which appeared earlier this week on the website for BBC News. "Chocolate 'Aids Fatigue Syndrome,'" read the headline, with the subhead blaring, "A daily dose of specially-formulated dark chocolate may help cut chronic fatigue syndrome symptoms." On the face of it, this is terrific news, particularly for CFS sufferers, as it's such a debilitating illness. But parse the headline, dig deeper and any hope of finding a "eureka" cure in the form of a Hershey's Special Dark fades fast.

First of all, the study, conducted by researchers at Hull York Medical School in the U.K., involved a grand total of 10 people. Yep, 10. The patients, all CFS sufferers, received 45 grams of dark chocolate daily for a month. Then they took a month off before switching to white chocolate that had been *died to look like* dark chocolate. Pardon me for snickering, but my 6-year-old could have designed a more scientifically sound study.

Unsurprisingly, those who took the "real" dark chocolate reported less fatigue than those who took the dyed chocolate. Could the dye have been laced with tryptophan? Doesn't the "real" dark chocolate contain caffeine? I'm no research scientist, but with only 10 people in a study I'm guessing any number of variables could have affected the final outcome, which may or may not be replicable with a larger sample size.

My point is this: look beyond the headlines. The food world, like the fashion world, is rife with ever-changing trends. Dark chocolate has indeed been shown to have multiple health properties and eating a little a day is probably good for you. But a splashy headline from a major world news source about a 10-person study rings more of irresponsible journalism than anything else.

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