



We've all got them: food fears. Tuna's toxic, sugar's really bad for you, and that soy in your morning latté could give you breast cancer. Here, we examine the most debated foods so you can stop stressing and start enjoying.



STORY BY VALERIE LATONA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW SCRIVANI

food for thought



STYLIST: SOO-JEONG KANG

After Manhattan nutritionist Brooke Alpert, MS, RD, sweats through her favorite Soul Cycle class on Manhattan's Upper East side, she watches her fellow cycling devotees make a beeline for the nearby Juice Generation—the popular New York City juice chain—for their post-sweat fix. One of the most requested drinks on the menu is Daily Detox, a blend of fresh carrot, cucumber, apple, lemon, and ginger.

The thinking: Daily juicing will cleanse your body of all its junk, detoxing it in the process. “Juicing is great because of all the micronutrients you get from greens like kale and spinach,” says Alpert, whose company, B Nutritious, counsels clients on eating well. “On the other hand, it’s not great because some of these juices—fruit-based ones, in particular—contain a lot of natural sugar, which is absorbed very quickly by the body. These people think they’re doing something good for their bodies, but they’re actually overdoing it and, in the process, consuming more calories than they’re burning.”



Despite this fact, juicing is big business. More than \$2.04 billion has been spent at juice bars and smoothie chains in the US this year. What those lines of people might not realize is that a diet rich in fiber—full of brightly colored fruits and vegetables that are rich in antioxidants—the body (particularly the liver) detoxes on its own, without all of the extra juice mixed in.

Food fads—propelled by fears and the myths that inevitably grow out of them—often become major moneymakers. As a result, there's more confusion than ever about what to eat and what not to eat. "One hundred and fifty years ago, we didn't have food myths," says Jeffrey Morrison, MD, a Manhattan-based integrative health specialist and author of *Cleanse Your Body, Clear Your Mind*. "All of our food was coming from our backyard."

Nutrition experts such as Susan Kleiner, PhD, RD—

The accepted lore is that plain old sugar will make you fat and agave nectar is the Holy Grail of sweeteners.

founder of High Performance Nutrition, LLC, a consulting firm in Mercer Island, Washington, and the author of seven books including the popular *Power Eating*—understand why these ideas become so buzzworthy. "Many of the food myths do start out with a kernel of truth," she insists.

To clear up the confusion, we asked some top experts to give their perspective on what kind of foods to eat and what items to avoid.

grass-fed beef

Are we being fed marketing hype, or is "grass-fed" truly a healthier alternative to the beef of conventionally farmed cows? According to Dr. Kleiner, grass-fed beef naturally produces more amounts of DHA and EPA, the omega-3

fatty acids important for a healthy brain and heart. That, in her opinion, makes grass-fed a superior choice.

When cows eat corn and grain—as they do when they're not grass-fed—they get fat very quickly, which changes the chemical consistency of the beef. According to Dr. Morrison, non-grass-fed cows are higher in unhealthy omega-6 fatty acids, which can cause inflammation and heart disease. "Grass-fed cows are allowed to enjoy a life consistent with the way their bodies work," adds Morrison. "They eat grass, and as a result produce omega-3's."

If you do eat grass-fed beef, keep in mind that it will taste different from season to season. "The beef from grass-fed cows is a direct expression of their diet, so as the cow's diet changes throughout the year and goes from eating lush grass in the summer to eating hay over the winter, you will probably be able to taste this in the meat," notes Kristy Lambrou, MS, RD, culinary nutritionist for Michelin-starred restaurant Rouge Tomate in New York City. Regardless of the season, never order your grass-fed beef well-done. "Grass-fed beef is leaner and has less fat," Lambrou explains. "You should order it medium rare—or at most medium—to keep it tender."

gluten

When star tennis player Novak Djokovic announced he was gluten-free in 2010—and went on to have a winning streak—many people adopted the attitude that they, too, should shun all gluten. In the intervening years, the gluten-free food and beverage industry has grown dramatically, and sales of these products are on track to exceed \$5 billion by 2015.

However, when Djokovic announced his dietary choice, few people paid attention to the fact that he had a medical reason for the change. Djokovic has celiac disease, which affects one out of every 133 Americans. "A gluten-free diet is the only known treatment for celiac disease," explains Keri Glassman, nutrition expert and author of *The New You (and Improved!) Diet*. "It's an autoimmune digestive disease that affects the small intestine's ability to absorb nutrients from food. For people who suffer from the disease, gluten can cause significant digestive problems and malnutrition."

But are there significant benefits to be gained by those unaffected by celiac disease? Glassman notices that a lot of people who go gluten-free lose the weight because they eliminate unnecessary snack foods. "If you cut out calorie-laden products you could lose weight, too," she says. "But it won't be related to the gluten."

According to Lauren Slayton, MS, RD, who founded the New York-based nutrition consultancy Foodtrainers, the health benefits of going gluten-free have more to do with what you add than what you take away. "A lot of people feel better with less gluten in their lives because our wheat is difficult to digest," Slayton says. "But that's only if you're cutting out white flour and processed foods in favor of fresh

Diet soda versus regular soda is like the electric chair versus lethal injection. Neither one is good for you.

fruits, vegetables, lean protein, and whole grains. If you're replacing these foods with gluten-free packaged foods, eating gluten-free is not going to be any better for you."

diet soda

Diet or regular. Does it matter, if both still cause weight gain? "Diet soda versus regular soda is like the electric chair versus lethal injection. Neither one is good for you," says Foodtrainers' Slayton. She points out that diet soda has never actually been shown to help weight loss. "It's full of artificial sweeteners, is very acidic, is carcinogenic, and causes bloating because of the carbonation."

A recent Brazilian study backs up this claim about diet soda. The study, conducted on laboratory rats, found that eating diet products with non-nutritive sweeteners in the form of saccharin or aspartame—from no-calorie frozen yogurt to diet soda—led to weight gain in rats, even when their total caloric intake was not increased.

"It's a very controversial issue," says Joy Bauer, bestselling author of *Food Cures* and a nutrition and health expert for *The Today Show*. "Even though diet sodas don't contain any real sugar, many brands contain acids—citric, malic, or phosphoric—that wear down your tooth enamel, making you more susceptible to cavities." Bauer notes that while the carbonation in soda can contribute to short-term bloating, it's unlikely to affect long-term weight gain.

A better bet? "Naturally flavored seltzers," recommends Bauer. "They're calorie-free and don't have anything artificial."

agave

Agave nectar first became popular because it is natural, from a cactus-like plant, and has a low glycemic index. This means it doesn't raise blood sugar levels as much as other sweeteners, a key for those with diabetes or who are at risk of diabetes. The accepted lore is that plain old sugar will make you fat, while agave nectar is the Holy Grail of sweeteners.

It turns out that agave is not as great as originally thought. "Agave is really a processed sweetener," says Alpert, whose book, *The Sugar Detox*, comes out in the spring. It seems natural because it originates from a plant, but unlike a truly natural sweetener like raw honey, agave is produced using a highly chemical process that extracts nectar out of the plants. This type of sweetener is readily metabolized as fat, which can cause weight gain. What's worse: "It's almost one hundred-percent pure fructose," explains Alpert. (That's more fructose than high fructose corn syrup.) "Eating too much fructose gives the liver a workout because it's metabolized there and can cause fatty liver disease. That is the beginning of everything from heart disease to diabetes."

So what do you do if you need a sweet fix? Your best options are unprocessed raw honey (“Heating honey kills the enzymes that give it its health benefits,” explains Morrison), molasses (best in smoothies and baked goods), and coconut palm sugar (a low processed, no-fructose sweetener from coconut palm leaves). But don’t over-stress about agave. Small amounts here and there won’t kill you. “You’re better off having a bite or two of a real dessert than using those pink, yellow, or blue packets filled with chemical sweeteners,” insists Alpert. “You shouldn’t worry about just what’s in your dessert. You also need to worry about how much of it you eat, so watch your portion sizes.”

Eating farmed fish is like eating a fish that’s been smoking cigarettes.

organic produce

A recent review of studies at the Stanford School of Medicine, published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* and widely reported in the media, found that organic produce was no more nutritious than the conventionally grown kind. Many experts dispute this, however, saying the funding for the study was from food manufacturers and inherently biased.

“Logically, something without carcinogens sprayed on them is going to be the healthier, tastier option,” says B Nutritious founder Alpert, who recommends organic produce for all of her clients.

“Because organic fruits and vegetables have to struggle in their environment to be a healthy plant, they produce phytonutrients, antioxidants, and enzymes that help fend off pests and infections,” explains Morrison. “We get the benefit of those when we eat them.” While conventional produce contains nutrients, experts like Morrison maintain that it’s nowhere near the amount found in organic fruits and vegetables.

“You just have to ask yourself: Do I really want to be exposed to, or have my kids exposed to, all of these pesticides?” says Robyn O’Brien, author of *The Unhealthy Truth: How Our Food is Making Us Sick and What We Can Do About It*. “You buy ‘organic’ not necessarily for what’s in it, but for what’s not in it.”

But does that mean if you can’t get, or afford, organic that you shouldn’t eat conventional fruits and vegetables at all? Absolutely not, according to Alpert. Fruits and vegetables organic or not, still contain nutrients. There is, however, a list of must-eat-organic fruits and vegetables—the so-called “dirty dozen” that deserves consideration. It’s based on findings from the non-profit Environmental Working Group and focuses on produce most contaminated with pesticides—peaches, apples, sweet bell peppers, celery, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, pears, grape, spinach, lettuce, and potatoes.

One other important note: Organic processed food is no

healthier than any other processed food. “Junk food, even if made with organic ingredients, is still junk food,” Alpert says.

fish

Fish has long been considered one of the most virtuous proteins on earth, though a number of controversies have been swimming around—one being the debate between wild-caught and farm-raised fish. “Eating farmed fish is like eating a fish that’s been smoking cigarettes,” insists Alpert, who advises consumers to always choose sustainable wild fish. “Many farmed fish have higher levels of contaminants like PCBs and antibiotics.”

“Farming fish today is like farming cattle,” concurs Dr. Morrison, who adds that eating farmed salmon can actually cause you to gain weight, thanks to hormone-changing chemicals found in the water. “They herd fish into pens, which is completely unnatural, and they’re fed foods that are not natural to them to make them grow bigger and faster.” Morrison tells people to opt for varieties like tilapia, red snapper, and ocean trout or branzino. In general, go for fish that are small enough to fit whole on your plate (salmon being the exception).

Then there’s the issue of toxic mercury in tuna and other popular fish, blamed for a host of health matters including fertility issues, heart disease, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s Disease. The burning of coal by power plants releases mercury into the air, which settles into water or on land where it can be washed into the water. Fish and shellfish take it in, and the metal toxin builds up in their bodies. Large, fatty, predatory fish (tuna, Chilean sea bass, swordfish) eat these smaller fish. Because the bigger fish live longer, they have more time to absorb the mercury, and it accumulates in their fat.

If you eat such fish—particularly fatty tuna or toro sold at sushi restaurants—you’re absorbing whatever toxins rest within that meal. Experts agree that it’s unnecessary to totally ban these popular fish from your diet, but cutting down consumption—and changing up the kinds of fish you eat—makes better sense.

corn

It’s been widely reported that corn—unless it’s organic—should be avoided at all costs, because it has been genetically modified. When you think about corn, particularly genetically modified corn, you need to know about one company: Monsanto. It’s an American agriculture biotech company that is the single largest producer of genetically engineered seeds, including corn, soybeans, canola, and cottonseed. “Companies like Monsanto took a toxin that had been sprayed over corn fields and engineered it into the

seed itself, so the growing corn plant produces its own insecticides,” explains O’Brien. “The result is that the corn plant now has to be regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency as a pesticide.”

It’s not common knowledge that this genetic tinkering has been going on behind the scenes of foods like corn. “These foods look, taste, and smell the same as foods that have been grown without genetically engineered seeds,” says O’Brien, who is working to have genetically engineered foods labeled as such in the United States. “This is the kind of corn that gets blended up and processed and can be found in corn starch or high fructose corn syrup, which is big in processed foods.” Right now, they’re not labeled. According to O’Brien’s estimation, 70 percent of processed foods contain genetically modified organisms or, as they’re commonly referred, GMOs.

California recently tried to pass legislation (Proposition 37) that required the mandatory labeling of these products, but it got shot down by voters in the recent election. (O’Brien points to a whopping \$46 million spent by the food industry

You buy organic not necessarily for what’s in it, but for what’s not in it



against the proposition as one of the reasons for its defeat.) The problem in a nutshell? “We haven’t done the decades of research to see how we’re going to react to these genetically engineered seeds,” says High Performance Nutrition’s Kleiner. But research is starting to slowly trickle in.

“What we do know is this: from the President’s Cancer Panel to the American Academy of Pediatrics, doctors are telling us to reduce our exposure to these synthetic chemicals and pesticides being poured on these crops,” says O’Brien, who adds that wheat and sugar beets are next up on Monsanto’s list of crops to become genetically engineered.

So how do you avoid genetically engineered corn until specific labeling has been put in place? Do your best to steer clear of processed foods with non-organic, corn-based ingredients. You can make sure to limit your intake of processed foods altogether and opt for only fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins. For a complete list of corn-based ingredients, which will often go by other names, go to livecornfree.com, a website dedicated to those with corn allergies.

A soy latté every now and then isn't the end of the world.

SOY

We've all heard rumblings of a potential connection between soy consumption and breast cancer. Could this ubiquitous legume and dairy alternative really pose such a risk? Research shows that soy protein contains a high level of plant-based estrogens called phytoestrogens, which mimic estrogens in the body and have been proven to increase breast cell proliferation. This is a widely accepted marker of breast cancer risk.

"For people who are estrogen-receptor-positive—or have breast cancer triggered by high levels of estrogen—it's recommended by oncologists that they limit their soy to no more than two to four servings per week," says Lambrou, who worked as an outpatient dietician at New York's Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. "The general consensus is that it's better to be safe than sorry."

"A soy latté every now and then isn't the end of the world," adds Yael Cohen, founder and CEO of nonprofit organization FCancer (letsfcancer.com), which encourages young adults to engage with parents about cancer prevention and early detection. "But chowing down on soy products daily might be more of a risk than it's worth."

As a rule, many experts suggest eating only pure, organic, non-genetically-modified soy products—tofu, tempeh, edamame—as opposed to processed soy products. Keep in mind that dairy-free latté alternatives like almond milk and cashew milk are protein-rich and super healthy for you.

raw food

"Raw foodists believe that cooking food greatly decreases its nutritional content and destroys plant enzymes that enhance how efficiently you digest and absorb food," explains Bauer. "Although there are many 'raw' variations out there and no one set of rules to follow, raw food diets are typically vegan diets that include only uncooked food or food warmed to a temperature that does not exceed 115 degrees Fahrenheit." Bauer adds that, unfortunately, "There's not much science to back up the enormous effort."

There's evidence that when it comes to nutrients, you get more, in many cases, once you cook some foods. "The nutrients in some foods actually become more bioavailable when cooked," says Rouge Tomate's Lambrou. "Tomato is one of these. The carotenoid lycopene is found in higher amounts in cooked tomatoes versus raw tomatoes. In fact, most of the antioxidants in the carotenoid family, found in orange and red fruits and vegetables—but also in some dark green leafy vegetables like kale and spinach—are more bioavailable when cooked and eaten with a small amount of fat."

One study, published in *The British Journal of Nutrition*, found that raw foodists—while having high levels of some nutrients in their blood—actually had low levels of the antioxidant lycopene. (A Harvard Medical School study, and

others, have linked high intake of lycopene with a lower risk of cancer and heart attack.) Asparagus, spinach, cabbage, mushrooms, and carrots are other foods that benefit from being cooked. What that means? You're getting more nutrients from these foods once you steam or lightly sauté them.

"Heat and light do damage to other essential nutrients, such as vitamin C and the B-vitamins, which are water-soluble," explains Lambrou. "For these foods, you should cook them as little as possible, particularly when it comes to cruciferous veggies like broccoli." In this case, Lambrou recommends blanching. "Blanching cuts down on cooking time and prolonged exposure to heat, which is what destroys these sensitive nutrients. This process also helps retain the bright color of the vegetables."

One thing you should always eat raw? Extra virgin olive oil. "Never cook with this, as contact with heat will destroy its extra benefits," says Lambrou. Instead, cook with regular olive oil or opt for grapeseed or safflower oil, which have higher smoke points and are able to tolerate high heat.

coconut water

Recently, there's been a lot of buzz around the idea that water can't hydrate you well, and coconut water is better for you. Coconut water—the clear, fat-free, nut-flavored liquid found inside young coconuts—is being marketed by beverage companies as a superior source of hydration because it's naturally rich in electrolytes like potassium. It's also being pitched to exercisers and athletes as a healthy alternative to water as well as sports beverages, which are made with added sugar and artificial colors.

In the midst of the hype, many people—including recreational and hard-core athletes—believe that coconut water is the most natural way to replenish fluids post-exercise. One study from the School of Medical Science at Universiti Sains Malaysia, disputes this notion. It says that exercisers who drank coconut water did, in fact, drink more, but they weren't actually any more hydrated than those who drank either a sports drink or water.

"Coconut water is good because it's natural and a great source of potassium," says Foodtrainers' Slayton. "But it doesn't have sodium." You can't use it to replace a sports drink like Gatorade, which contains a balance of both sodium and potassium. She adds that drinking too much coconut water, and taking in too much potassium, can cause bloating, gas, and diarrhea.

Intense exercise aside, is coconut water worth drinking? That's up to the individual. There are certainly less healthy beverages found at the corner store, but a "magic elixir" it is not. A few things to remember: coconut water tastes best when served cold, its sweetened varieties are packed with sugar, and—as with all things you consume—it's best to drink it in moderation. ●



Coconut water is good because it's natural and a great source of potassium.