

5 MYTHS, DEBUNKED

October is Health Literacy Month — a perfect time to let go of what you “know” that just ain’t so. By Haley Longman

It’s been estimated that 88 percent of Americans lack the skills and knowledge to be truly “proficient” in managing their health—they’re short, in other words, on what’s known as health literacy. We’re all bombarded by information, what with social media, Dr. Google and that all-knowing neighbor over the back fence, but some of that information cries out for the prefix “mis-.” And many of us don’t know what to believe.

That’s one reason October has been designated Health Literacy Month, honoring the correct understanding of health-care language and issues that is available to us these days once we sort out the wheat from the chaff. Essentially, the more “health-literate” we are, the lower our chance of being hospitalized, the more preventive care we receive and the better our health outcomes overall.

Have you been believing—or half believing—some of the myths listed here? If so, here’s your chance to wise up—and embrace health literacy.



▪ **THE MYTH:** Applying butter to a burn helps it heal faster. **The truth:** This old household remedy has no evidence to back it up. In fact, the American Academy of Dermatology warns that applying butter may cause an infection. Instead, douse the irritated area in cool water or apply a cold compress for about 10 minutes or until the pain subsides. You can also apply a gentle topical treatment such as Vaseline once or a twice a day to speed the healing process.

▪ **THE MYTH:** Cracking your knuckles causes arthritis. **The truth:** Several studies on this topic, including one by Harvard Medical School, have found that however annoying knuckle-cracking can be for those around you, it won’t cause arthritis in your hands or fingers. Cracking your knuckles pulls your joints apart, whereas arthritis is caused by a broken-down joint that causes the joints to rub together. Knuckle cracking is not a good habit, however; experts caution that it can lead to a weakened grip, temporary hand swelling and even possible injury.

▪ **THE MYTH:** Antiperspirant deodorant increases a woman’s risk of breast cancer.

The truth: Though some have worried that the aluminum in antiperspirants might stimulate production of estrogen, leading to increased breast cancer risk if the aluminum seeps into the body through nicks and cuts from shaving, the National Cancer Institute says many studies have refuted these claims. There is no known association between deodorant use and cancer. Breast cancer is, however, more common in women with a family history of the disease; such women should take extra pains to stay up-to-date on their mammograms.

▪ **THE MYTH:** Exercising in the evening makes it harder to sleep. **The truth:** A workout does increase your heart rate, body temperature and adrenaline levels, but research has found that if you do moderate-intensity exercise and finish at least 90 minutes before you hit the hay, it won’t affect your ability to fall asleep. In fact, exercise in general can help you sleep better.

Listen to your body, though; choose the exercise regimen and schedule that work best for you.

▪ **THE MYTH:** Eating eggs regularly raises your cholesterol levels, a heart-disease risk factor. **The truth:** This one is complicated. Some studies have indeed linked egg consumption to increased levels of “bad” cholesterol (low-density lipoprotein, or LDL) in the blood. But eggs can also raise your “good” cholesterol (high-density lipoprotein, or HDL), which is beneficial. In any case, the main worry about cholesterol is not the cholesterol we eat, but the way saturated fat and trans fat in foods trigger our livers to make the stuff. Some of eggs’ previous bad rap may have been because these protein-rich wonders travel in dangerous company—fatty cooking oils in the pan, sizzling bacon, butter-loaded biscuits or muffins. Check with your doctor if you have diabetes or another chronic condition, but, as the Mayo Clinic puts it, “Most healthy people can eat up to seven eggs a week without increasing their risk of heart disease.”

4 EASY WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH LITERACY

1. Speak up. This can mean directing a question about your dosage to a pharmacist who fills your prescription or calling to speak to a nurse at your physician’s office when you’re experiencing side effects or symptoms. Advocating for yourself is key to maximizing your health, both physically and emotionally.

2. Request your medical records. Any new doctor you’re going to see will want access to your medical records to optimize your care, and a law in New Jersey gives you the legal right to request these records and review them yourself. According to state law, medical records are kept for seven years from the date of service. Note that this isn’t the case for mental health notes, though; you can request notes from your therapy sessions, but your mental health provider isn’t obligated to hand them over.

3. Read well-vetted sources. The internet may lead you to believe you’re suffering from an array of ailments when it’s just a headache, so make sure that if you must go online to learn about symptoms or a certain condition, you’re reading a source that has been vetted by a doctor or a verified expert. Usually anything with .gov, .edu or .org at the end is legit (such as cdc.gov, health.harvard.edu or healthywomen.org), and medical journals or studies, many of which can be accessed online without a subscription or a medical license, are also a safe bet.

4. Stay informed close to home. Bergen County is home to five acclaimed hospitals, all of which offer classes and/or health fairs whose goal it is to educate the community on various health topics. For example: —**Bergen New Bridge Medical Center in Paramus** has a team whose job it is to foster health literacy through community health fairs and public presentations. More info: newbridgehealth.org/health-services/community-health/

—**Englewood Health in Englewood** hosts CPR courses, cancer symposiums, prenatal yoga sessions and more. More info: englewoodhealth.org/calendar-events-classes

—**Hackensack University Medical Center in Hackensack** has a plethora of classes held both online and in person, from Breastfeeding 101 to knowing the difference between a heart attack and chest pain. More info: events.hackensackmeridianhealth.org

—**Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck** has a bevy of supportive and informative groups for new parents, stroke survivors, cancer patients and others. More info: holyname.org/events/

—**The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood** has specific courses on various health ailments such as endometriosis, kidney disease and diabetes. It also hosts “Weekly Walks with a Doctor” at Veterans Memorial Field in Ridgewood, in which an on-staff physician discusses a specific health issue while getting some steps in. More info: valleyhealth.com/events/