

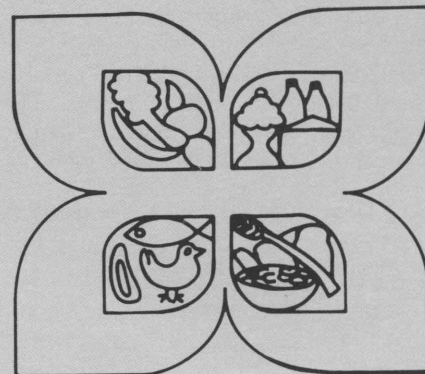
FACT SHEET

gw 30m
2-11-77

L-1517

FOOD FADS: FACT OR FANCY?

Mary K. Sweeten*



Consumers are becoming increasingly interested in nutrition. Most Americans want to buy the most healthful food they can for the money they spend. Yet, in a recently conducted nutritional survey, most Americans questioned showed a lack of sound information about food buying and nutritional values of various foods. The survey also showed that many people are being misguided by advertising claims for various "health foods" and weight control programs.

Health Food Movement

Although our food supply is unsurpassed in quantity, variety and nutritional value, each year consumers spend more than \$100 million in organic food stores, and more than \$600 million on self-prescribed vitamins.

The health food fad is having tremendous economic impact on consumers because they are paying from 1½ to 1¾ times more for organic foods than for conventional food items. In February 1976, a USDA survey conducted in the Washington, D.C. area showed that a basket of 47 standard foods bought in a supermarket cost an average of \$17.49 as compared to an average of \$28.00 for the same items purchased in a natural food store. The difference in cost was greater for processed than for unprocessed foods.

*Extension foods and nutrition specialist, The Texas A&M University System.

The Consumer Research Center of The Texas A&M University System recently surveyed health food stores in Dallas and Houston and found that most health food purchasers were middle-class people in the active, productive age bracket. (Previous research had indicated that health food users tended to be older adults of a lower socio-economic group.) The study also showed that while most people buy their vitamin and mineral supplements from supermarkets, confirmed health food users buy these products from health food stores, where they are likely to cost more.

Health food users gave a variety of reasons for their purchases. Some said health foods "help one stay healthy," "are more nutritious" or "cure specific illnesses." Some said they bought these foods because they "have fewer preservatives and additives," "have better flavor and texture," "keep weight down" or "have more vitamins and minerals." These consumers either lacked nutritional and scientific knowledge or blindly accepted promotional claims by health food manufacturers.

The Health Food Fallacy

Exactly what do the terms "organic foods," "natural foods," and "health foods" mean? Organic foods are foods grown without the use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Natural foods are foods that remain in their original form as much as possible, with little or no processing or refining and no food additives. Health foods are chiefly diet supplements

such as seaweed, wheat germ, lecithin and rose hips or other foods advertised as having special health benefits.

Advocates of natural and organic foods believe that food nutrients are destroyed through farming methods and processing, and that poisonous chemicals are introduced into foods by agriculture and industry. Both ideas are erroneous. Modern processing methods help preserve the nutritional value of foods. Also, organic or chemical fertilizers are safe and produce healthful, high quality food. And they are necessary to produce the large crop yields needed to supply enough food for our population. The National Plant Food Institute has estimated that chemical fertilizers save the nation \$13 billion a year on its food bill.

Are Diet Supplements Needed?

One of the main promotional drives of the vitamin industry and of health food faddists is the nutritional insurance idea that everyone should take vitamins, just to be sure. But the average healthy person who eats a well-balanced diet daily, based on the Basic Four Food Guide, does not need vitamins or other dietary supplements. Eating a variety of foods usually

supplies all nutrients necessary for good health. For some people, however, nutritional supplements are desirable. If a physician prescribes a special or restricted diet, he probably also will prescribe nutritional supplements. In addition, supplemental vitamins may be prescribed for a particular health problem. But nutritional supplements used unnecessarily are an economic waste. Also, research has shown that large doses of vitamins A, D and C can have a toxic effect. Thus, large doses of vitamin supplements are not recommended.

Consumer concern about the food supply and diet can be overdone. If this concern is based on misconceptions or faulty understanding, it can lead to needless anxiety and expense. Much unreliable literature found in health food stores advocates extreme diets — the low carbohydrate weight reduction diet, for instance. Adherence to fad diets and misinformation about nutrition and diet may be dangerous to health. Physicians, dietitians, county Extension agents (home economics) and other knowledgeable persons can answer questions about foods and nutrition, and help prevent consumer deception by the erroneous claims of food faddists.

References

- Deutsch, Ronald M. *Realities of Nutrition*. Palo Alto, California: Bull Publishing Co., 1976.
- Beal, Virginia. "Food Faddism." *Dairy Council Digest*, January-February 1973, Volume 44, 1.
- Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, January 1977, Volume 70, 1; and June 1976, Volume 68, 6.
- Jukes, Thomas. "Down the Primrose Path with Organic Foods." *School Foodservice Journal*, October 1974.
- Margolias, Sidney. *Health Foods — Facts and Fakes*. New York: Walker and Co., 1973.

The author wishes to thank Frances Reasonover, Sally Coble and Marilyn Haggard, Extension foods and nutrition specialists, for their help in preparing this publication.

Educational programs conducted by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service serve people of all ages regardless of socio-economic level, race, color, sex, religion or national origin.

Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, The Texas A&M University System and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914.