

In health matters, the headlines don't tell the whole story

Read health reports with a critical eye, and try to go back to the source of the information to filter out the fiction

Lois Glover



You can't turn on the television or open a magazine these days without being inundated with health news and statistics. But can a 30-second commercial or snappy magazine headline really tell the whole story? With topics such as hormone therapy, atypical fractures, and calcium intake being buzzed

about in the media, women need to learn how to filter fact from fiction to make informed decisions about their health.

Understanding how the media operates is a good place to start. Newspapers, radio, TV, magazines and the Internet are all vying for your attention in a crowded marketplace, as are the adver-

tisers who buy space and time on these outlets. As space is often limited and expensive, it is important to get your attention as quickly as possible – which may mean skipping a few details in the process, or sometimes taking liberties with the numbers.

Get the full story

In a recent breast cancer awareness advertising spot, CSI actress Marg Helgenberger stated: "One in eight women will get breast cancer this year." In truth though this statistic represents a cumulative lifetime risk (up to age 85) if a woman does not succumb to other diseases first. As breast cancer risk increases with age, the one in eight statistic is misleading for younger women.

A woman is more likely to die from cardiovascular disease than breast cancer. For example, deaths from breast cancer in women ages 55 to 59 affect only five women out of 1,000, while 55 out of a thousand women will die from other causes. In women aged 60 to 69, breast cancer accounts for seven out of 1,000 deaths, with 126 dying from other causes. When examining health risks, it is important to look at the time frame involved (known as the "absolute risk") and how we compare one group to another. Unfortunately, media focus can often distort a woman's perception of disease risk.

Go to the source

As little as one word used incorrectly can be enough to change the meaning of a sentence and create confusion for the reader. As media stories are edited and picked up by other media outlets, the original message can get watered down or lost altogether. Think of the childhood game Telephone: by the time the message is whispered all the way around the circle, it often bears little or no resemblance to the original.

Words like "cause" can be dangerous when used in the wrong context. You may have heard about osteoporosis drugs "causing" unusual thigh bone

fractures. While there may be a relationship between these fractures and long-term use of osteoporosis drugs, there is no evidence that these drugs cause the fractures. The benefits of these drugs far outweigh the risks for the majority of osteoporosis patients.

A good rule of thumb is to find the initial source of the information. You can use whatever information you have to track down the source: the name of a scientific journal, the researcher's name, or the topic. You could even try calling the media outlet where you heard the story, or your local medical library.

Read critically

Your goal is to find the most reputable information available. For instance, if you heard something about a link between calcium and increased risk of heart attacks, you could look on the Osteoporosis Canada website. You will find a statement providing specific information about the study and its findings. It suggests calcium supplementation should not be stopped, but high doses of supplementation should not be used by post-menopausal women who meet target levels through their diets.

A lot of media coverage refers to studies. It is important to examine research findings critically. Who participated in the study? How many people participated? What kind of research was done? How was it done? These are just some of the questions you need to ask.

Your best defence against a barrage of confusing headlines is to become media savvy and arm yourself with reputable information. Once you have all of the information available, you will be in a better position to make an informed decision about your health.

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