

Food and Fiction

The Sydney Morning Herald
by Paula Goodyer, January 11, 2014



Myth: Mushrooms are a good source of vitamin B12.

Photo: Natalie Boog

Mushrooms are rich in vitamin B12, true or false?

[False] It's one of many common diet myths.

Myths about nutrition are nothing new but thanks to the internet, misinformation about food can spread like a virus as half truths are rapidly twisted into "facts". Here are some common food myths put to rest.

Myth: Olive oil produces carcinogens when it is heated.

Fact: When any cooking oil is heated to the point where it smokes (its smoke point) it breaks down and may produce potentially carcinogenic toxins. Different oils reach smoke point at different temperatures. Good quality extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) has a smoke point of 180 to 210 degrees that suits most cooking techniques, including deep frying, according to Lisa Rowntree, chief executive of the Australian Olive Association. Most olive oil produced in Australia is EVOO. It is harder to pinpoint the smoke point of a more refined olive oil that's not EVOO. It depends on what sort of refining it's undergone, Rowntree says, but the better the quality of olive oil the higher the smoke point. The bottom line is, avoid heating any oil until it's hot enough to smoke.

Myth: You can reduce the risk of food allergies in children by avoiding allergenic foods in pregnancy.

Fact: Studies show that avoiding potentially allergenic foods, such as nuts, eggs, milk, seafood, soy and wheat, does not prevent food allergies in children, according to the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy. ASCIA's advice: it is best to continue eating these foods during pregnancy because of the risk of missing out on important nutrients.

Myth: Meat is so hard to digest it putrefies in your stomach.

Fact: This is a salvo sometimes fired by vegetarians at equally misinformed meat eaters who insist that meatless diets are nutritionally inadequate. In fact, meat is fully digested and broken down into amino acids needed for cell growth and repair, says dietitian Maria Packard, a spokeswoman for the Dietitians' Association of Australia. However, meat's high protein content does slow down the rate of digestion.

"On average, a meal that includes meat will take three hours to leave the stomach as opposed to a glass of lemonade which takes a few minutes," Packard says.

Myth: Mushrooms are a good source of vitamin B12.

Fact: There are excellent reasons to eat mushrooms, just don't expect them to deliver much vitamin B12. The main sources of this essential vitamin are animal foods such as meat, fish, poultry and dairy products. This makes it difficult to get B12 from a vegan diet that excludes these foods, although some manufactured foods and soy milks are fortified with B12.

Mushrooms, the only natural plant source of vitamin B12, are often claimed as a good source of this vitamin but one serve of 100 grams (the equivalent of three average-size button mushrooms) provides no more than 5 per cent of the daily requirement, says the Australian Mushroom Growers' Association.

Myth: Margarine is full of trans fats.

Fact: Synthetic trans fats are created by hydrogenation, a process that turns liquid vegetable oils into a spreadable alternative to butter. However, Australian manufacturers changed production methods for these spreads in the '90s so the content of trans fats in these products is reduced to negligible levels, Packard says.

Myth: Spinach is a great source of iron.

Fact: One of the stickiest myths ever. Spinach does contain iron but also oxalic acid which makes the iron hard to absorb.

Still, it's a good place to find the B vitamin folate, vitamin C, beta-carotene, and the antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin, important for eye health.

Myth: If you're lactose intolerant you should avoid all dairy products.

Fact: People who are lactose intolerant don't produce lactase, the enzyme that breaks down lactose (the sugar naturally found in dairy food). But most lactose intolerant people can handle some lactose, Packard says, though the amount will vary from person to person.

"Small amounts of cheese are usually OK because cheese isn't high in lactose. Yoghurt is usually well tolerated because the bacteria in yoghurt break the lactose down. Some people can also tolerate small amounts of milk," she says.

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