

Rumors vs. Reliable Information

By Susan Nitzke and Barbara Ingham

These days, most savvy consumers have learned to ignore scary rumors that are spread by email, the Internet, infomercials, etc. Still, it can be difficult to distinguish reliable warnings from false rumors (for example, Aspartame/Nutrasweet causing brain cancer or multiple sclerosis, flesh-eating germs in bananas, and toxic ingredients in canola oil).

Implications for Extension Educators. One challenge of learner centered education is that “urban legends” and other types of misinformation may be shared by well-meaning learners during small-group activities. When this occurs, Extension educators are advised to tactfully counteract such statements by explaining that particular information is controversial, outdated, or widely disputed by experts in the field and quickly guide the learners’ attention back to the main points of the lesson or program.

References and resources:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/foodandnutrition.html> is the link for the food and nutrition section of Medlineplus. MedlinePlus is a service of the National Institutes of Health that provides extensive health information including directories, a medical encyclopedia and a medical dictionary, health information from the media, etc.

<http://urbanlegends.about.com/cs/nethoaxes/ht/emailhoax.htm> This website has annoying advertisements, but contains helpful information on how to spot email hoaxes.

<http://snopes.com> Snopes.com is independently managed by Barbara and David Mikkelson. It does contain ads.

<http://www.eatright.org/Media/content.aspx?id=264> This is the link for the American Dietetic Association's consumer diet and lifestyle book reviews.

http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=4&tax_level=1&tax_subject=249 This is a link to the National Agricultural Library's Food and Nutrition Information Center. Click on “misinformation” in the list of topics A-Z.

<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/default.htm> is the site for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's consumer alerts. Click on the foods section.

<http://www.quackwatch.org/>. This site is getting to be a bit “dated,” but you can still find useful information in its searchable archives. Quackwatch, Inc., is a nonprofit corporation headed by Stephen Barrett, M.D. to combat health-related frauds, myths, fads, and fallacies. The Quackwatch website has many articles about evaluating nutrition products and a searchable database, but some information at this site is outdated, including frequent references to older editions of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Food Guide Pyramid).

(Nutrition for Family Living article from 2007, updated September 2010)