Nutrition Accuracy in Popular Magazines (1992–1994)

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"Stop dieting, America. Instead, improve your eating habits."

Sage advice, including this common theme, dominated nutrition reporting in magazines between 1992 and 1994. This encouraging news comes from a new Survey of Nutrition Accuracy in Popular Magazines conducted by the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH). The survey is the sixth in an ongoing series that has tracked magazine nutrition reporting since 1982.

The ACSH survey found 15 out of 20 magazines to be EXCELLENT or GOOD sources of nutrition information. Not since ACSH began its survey (it has conducted it almost every two years since 1982) has a majority—in this case, 75 percent—of the magazines reviewed earned ratings in the topmost categories. This finding reflects a solid new trend in quality nutrition reporting.

Three magazines were rated as EXCELLENT (90% to 100% accurate) sources of nutrition information: *Consumer Reports* (95%), *Better Homes and Gardens* (91%) and *Parents* (91%).

Twelve magazines were rated GOOD (80% to 89% accurate): *Cooking Light* (89%), *Glamour* (88%), *Reader's Digest* (88%), *Mademoiselle* (88%), *American Health* (88%), *Prevention* (87%), *Self* (87%), *Woman's Day* (86%), *Good Housekeeping* (84%), *McCall's* (84%), *Redbook* (84%) and *Health* (82%).

Four magazines were rated FAIR (70% to 79% accurate): *Men's Health* (77%), *New Woman* (77%), *Vogue* (77%) and *Runner's World* (74%).

For the sixth consecutive survey, *Cosmopolitan* was rated as a POOR source of nutrition information (below 70% accurate), earning a 69 percent rating. *Cosmo* thus has the dubious honor of standing alone in the POOR category.

Magazines used to be the public's number-one source of nutrition information, but a 1995 report by The American Dietetic Association (ADA)[1] found magazines taking a back seat to TV for today's consumer. According to the ADA, 42 percent of people get their nutrition news from TV, while 39 percent—still a sizable number—rely on magazines to find out about nutrition. Thus, a large number of Americans still need to know that the information they get from magazines is both accurate and reliable.

The Survey: Methodology and Rating Criteria

Using *Advertising Age* circulation figures, ACSH identified 20 top-circulating American magazines that regularly feature nutrition articles.[2] We chose magazines whose target audiences differed in order to sample articles aimed at a variety of consumers. Three magazines evaluated previously—

Family Circle, Harper's Bazaar and *Ladies' Home Journal*—were dropped from this year's survey because they published too few articles on nutrition. One magazine—*Men's Health*—is new to the survey.

We randomly chose eight articles per magazine for evaluation. To eliminate judging bias, magazine and author names were deleted and the articles were scanned and reset in a uniform format. Articles from *Consumer Reports* remained recognizable to judges due to that magazine's distinctive product-analysis chart format, however.

Four experts in nutrition and food science independently judged each article's accuracy in three areas: providing factual information, presenting information objectively and making sound recommendations. The judges were asked to evaluate the articles by responding to comments such as, "The article documented the source of the information," "The headline was an accurate reflection of the article's content" and, "The recommendations were supported by information from the article." They were instructed to indicate whether they "strongly agreed," "somewhat agreed," "were neutral," "somewhat disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with each comment.

These responses corresponded to numeric values ranging from a high score of five to a low of one. A composite score was determined for each article based on the judges' total scores, and the composite scores for each magazine's selections were averaged to get that magazine's overall rating.

An independent statistician, Dr. Jerome Lee, tabulated the results and ranked the magazines from highest to lowest. The highest possible rating was 100 percent. Categories were assigned as follows: EXCELLENT (90% to 100%), GOOD (80% to 89%), FAIR (70% to 79%) and POOR (below 70%).

Using the composite score for each article, Dr. Lee also looked at individual article performance with respect to factual accuracy, presentation style and recommendations. He found that articles with high composite scores reflected consistently good scores in all three categories and that poor-scoring articles were deficient across the board in all three categories. While the magazines ranked EXCELLENT and GOOD contained high numbers of articles with high composite scores, no magazine completely avoided having articles whose composite scores were either mediocre or low. Thus, even in the best ranked magazines there is still room for improvement.

Because the rating criteria and methodology of this latest survey were similar to those used in 1990–1992, the new results can be compared directly with the findings of the 1990–1992 survey. Due to changes in criteria and methodology, however, the latest results cannot be compared with the

results of earlier surveys.

A few magazines' ratings dropped slightly in comparison with the last survey, but those decreases were not statistically significant. A summary of past and present magazine ratings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Rankings of Evaluated Magazines

Magazine	Circulation* (millions)	Circulation (rank)	Audience score	Previous score	Current score
Consumer Reports	4.6**	N/A		88	95
Parents	1.9	38	Consumer	85	91
Reader's Digest	15.1	1		85	88
Better Homes & Gardens	7.6	5		87	91
Cooking Light	1.2	52	Homemaking	91	89
Good Housekeeping	5.2	6		88	84
American Health	0.8	101		88	88
Prevention	3.4	13		80	87
Health	0.9	87	Health	75	82
Men's Health	1.3	51		N/A†	77
Runner's World	0.4	189		77	74
Glamour	2.2	28		86	88
Mademoiselle	1.3	47		75	88
Self	1.2	57		76	87
Woman's Day	4.7	9		80	86
Redbook	3.4	16	Women	80	84
McCall's	4.6	10		80	84
New Woman	1.3	48		74	77
Vogue	1.2	59		75	77
Cosmopolitan	2.5	23		62	69

*Circulation figures obtained from *Advertising Age*, February 1995
**Obtained from Consumers' Union
†not previously evaluated

Magazines Rated Excellent (90% to 100% Accuracy)

Articles in *Consumer Reports*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Parents* were consistently reliable. (Some minor errors resulted in small point losses.)

Consumer Reports' hallmark product-analysis articles were high-scoring, factual overviews of

their subject matter. They included articles on sports drinks ("Selling Sweat," Aug. '93) and fast food ("Can Fast Food Be Good for You?," Aug. '94). Data were translated into easy-to-grasp concepts (comparing the fat in one Hardee's Frisco Burger to the fat in five regular hamburgers, for instance). *Consumer Reports'* authors resisted labeling foods as bad or good, opting instead to recommend reasonable alternatives (such as saying "hold the mayonnaise, bacon and cheese"—for a saving of 240 calories and 22 grams of fat—or balancing a high-fat lunch with a lower fat dinner). Consumer Reports also presented both sides of debatable issues, such as the question of what percentage of a diet should be made up of fat calories (the government says 30 percent; other groups say less than 30 percent).

Consumer Reports' 95 percent score reflects a significant jump from its GOOD (88%) score in the last survey. This improved score may reflect the high number of straight-facts, product-analysis articles from *Consumer Reports* that were randomly included this time, in comparison with the combination of different types of articles in the last survey—article types that did not score as well.

Better Homes and Gardens promoted lifestyle change over food restriction in both "Twelve Steps to a Lifetime of Healthful Eating" (Sept. '93) and "Overcoming Diet Failure: Beating the Biggest Obstacles to Permanent Weight Loss" (Aug. '94). Reliable strategies to end bad eating habits were offered by authorities on the subject. Instead of condemning ingredients, "The Smart Salad" (July '93) suggested novel substitutions to lower fat content (halving the number of walnuts in a Waldorf Salad but toasting them first to enhance their flavor, for example).

Better Homes and Gardens was 91 percent accurate (compared to 87% in the last survey) but lost a few points in articles such as "Our Food Police" (Feb. '94) for overstating the role of advocacy groups in monitoring the nation's food supply.

Parents handled new research smoothly. The magazine used credible, well-documented sources; and its recommendations echoed expert scientific opinion. Judge Berman-Levine noted that "Milk" (Aug. '94) did a good job of explaining to consumers why they are hearing so much controversy over milk; but the article's implication that antibiotic-tainted milk from treated cows is served to consumers was an overstatement. Judge Kroger pointed out that milk "does not contain antibiotics or antibiotic residues. Numerous safeguards are in place from the farm to postprocessing inspection that assure this." *Parents'* 91 percent rating is up from its previous 85 percent.

Magazines Rated Good (80% to 89% Accuracy)

In the previous survey *Cooking Light*'s 91 percent rating earned it an EXCELLENT designation; a slight slip to 89 percent this time moved it to the top of the GOOD group. The two scores are not statistically different, however. According to statistician Dr. Lee, "*Cooking Light* is not less reliable; one or two points up or down is a normal margin of error in the rating methodology."

Cooking Light's "Winning Nutrition for Growing Athletes" (Sept. '93) cautioned against restricting calories in the high-growth adolescent years. But "What to Eat After Your Workout" (May '94) recommended eating 100 grams of carbohydrate after heavy exercise and following that up with an additional 100 grams every two to four hours. That quantity seemed excessive, so we queried sports nutritionist Nancy Clark of Sports Medicine Brookline in Brookline, Massachusetts. Clark said the quantity is appropriate for a 200-pound individual. The blanket recommendation is about double what the average female reader would need, however.

Glamour, *Reader's Digest*, *Mademoiselle* and *American Health* all received 88 percent ratings. Three maintained their GOOD standing from the previous survey, in which *American Health* scored 88 percent, *Glamour* 86 percent and *Reader's Digest* 85 percent. *Mademoiselle* leaped into the GOOD category from its former FAIR rating of 75 percent.

Glamour's "Caffeine: The Lowdown on a Favorite High" (May '93) was uniformly well rated. Judge Kroger commented that it was "The latest on a complex issue that did an excellent job of documenting the source and identifying researchers doing the work on caffeine." "Are You Getting Enough Calcium?" (June '93) handily addressed bone-building measures, but judges noted that the source of the article's calcium consumption data was not given. Overall, discussions were balanced, sources were recognizably expert and *Glamour* was not afraid to tackle new research rather than staying on safe ground rehashing the same old stuff.

In *Reader's Digest* "Food Poisoning: The New Epidemic" (July '94) advised consumers to make sure meat is cooked beyond the pink stage and told restaurant patrons to request a new plate when returning undercooked meat since raw meat juices contaminate. The article was a good analysis at a time when almost half of today's food dollars go to buy meals prepared outside the home.
"Attacked by a Killer Egg Roll" (Dec. '94) satirized low-fat mania but lost points for calling diner food, eggs, mayonnaise and other foods "bad." (Although eating habits may be bad, no food is taboo within an overall balanced diet.)

Mademoiselle jumped off the fad-diet bandwagon and into the GOOD category—an improvement over its FAIR rating in the last survey. In fact, this score represents a significant improvement in nutrition reporting. "Before You Go on Another Diet, Read This" (April '94) sensibly quoted a variety of experts to point out mainstream thinking on weight issues. (Since weight-standard charts do not factor in exercise habits or body type, obesity researchers advised keeping these limitations in mind when using the charts.)

"Natural Wonders?" (Oct. '93) was basically sound; but the article started out as an overview of the dangers of herbal products marketed as diet aids and ended by saying, "It's up to you to decide if the risk is really worth the weight loss"—thus implying that these products are, indeed, effective. Judges would have preferred a strong condemnation of these unproved products. Finally, in contrast to some headlines in the past that were misleading and rather exploitative, *Mademoiselle*'s headlines this time accurately reflected article content.

American Health—a magazine known for addressing new research—maintained its past rating of 88 percent. One article, "Fantastic Folic Acid" (April '94), dealt with neural tube defect risk reduction through folic acid–rich diets and supplementation. It received a nearly perfect score. The article educated a vulnerable segment of the population and exemplified nutrition reporting at its finest.

On the other hand, not all the articles in *American Health* received such high praise. "Do Antioxidants Reduce Disease?" (May '94) relied on the unconventional views of a medical researcher who provided unreasonable criticism of both the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)'s ruling prohibiting antioxidant health claims on product labels. "Safer Supplements" (Oct. '93) cited the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN), a supplement trade association, which downplayed risks of serious harm such as the risk of hepatitis from the use of chaparral as a purported sleep aid. The CRN also said that the FDA is biased against supplements. While quoting critics of "establishment" nutrition is acceptable, not providing a counter quote from the FDA presents an unbalanced picture.

Prevention magazine maintained its GOOD rating with a score of 87 percent, up from 80 percent in the previous survey. Although the *Prevention* title "Beta-Carotene Battles Ultraviolet A" (June '93) suggests that science already knows the vitamin will provide protection against skin cancer, the article itself presented the research as preliminary, not proven. "Step Two: 40 Plus Eating" (Aug. '94) stated that fats should not exceed 25 percent of calorie intake; but the idea wasn't illustrated to

enable the reader to follow through. Furthermore, the article made a factual error in stating, "Fat calories are the primary source of calories in most people's diets." According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), carbohydrates currently make up the bulk of the average diet. On the whole, however, *Prevention*'s efforts toward maintaining objectivity were commendable.

Self earned a GOOD (87%) rating in contrast to its former FAIR (76%) rating due to well-scoring articles including "From Twinkies to Tofu" (Aug. '93), a piece about eating trends. But major point loss occurred when "The Diet Gospel According to Gullo" (May '93) falsely attributed long-known behavior modifications to Gullo, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology from an unnamed institution. Gullo had no apparent credentials in nutrition, and the article's "me" (Gullo) versus "them" (other weight-loss approaches) summary of what works to shed pounds lacked objectivity. Further, the article did not acknowledge that many of these behavioral principles are incorporated into other modern weight-loss strategies.

The high cost of Gullo's program ($450 per initial consultation) and its quick-weight-loss pattern (more than one pound per week) are setups for weight regain according to known criteria of successful diets, as cited in Guthrie and Picciano's *Human Nutrition* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1995).

Woman's Day articles written by nutrition experts were generally well rated and contributed to an overall 86 percent rating (up from 80% in the last survey). Occasionally some articles, such as "The No Time to Diet Diet" (Sept. 1, 1993), lost minor points for saying "according to experts" instead of thoroughly documenting sources. Additionally, the "No Time to Diet Diet" failed to provide enough calories. On the other hand, *Woman's Day*'s "Best Ever One Week Diet" (Nov. 2, 1993) made expert use of the Food Guide Pyramid, a graphic printed on many food labels that can be used as a diet-balancing tool.

Good Housekeeping's rating in this survey dropped slightly, from 88 percent to 84 percent, but the magazine maintained its GOOD rating. The well-rated "Cold Facts on Frozen Yogurt" (Nov. '94) compared the nutrient profiles of yogurt products. But a column entitled "Eating Right" (Sept. '93) sacrificed accuracy for brevity when a reader asked, "Is breast milk really better for my newborn?" A physician responded that although breast milk is optimal, "you aren't putting her at any risk by choosing formula." Judges felt the brief answer failed to provide a complete picture of breast-feeding benefits. In *Good Housekeeping*'s "The Safe Return of the Diet Pill" (May '93), the title, the lead sentence ("diet pills are back in favor") and the obscure placement of facts supportive of lifestyle

change versus the quick fix were all misleading.

Redbook and *McCall's* both received 84 percent accuracy ratings in this survey. Both had received 80 percent in the last survey. For the most part, *Redbook* and *McCall's* joined the trend away from diets that spell out rigid meal plans and instead promoted diet plans designed to change poor eating habits. Point losses were due to minor factual errors, headlines that didn't reflect article content or recommendations based on nonexpert advice.

Redbook's "Hottest Diet Advice in America" (May '94) was actually based on long-known information, as repackaged by diet guru Susan Powter. The article, an excerpt from Powter's book, had an inaccurate title seemingly chosen for its cover-blurb appeal. So, while judges found nothing wrong with Powter's advice (exercise and eat well), neither did they find it particularly new or "hot." A piece entitled "The Morning After Diet" (April '94) explained the physiology of weight loss using experts' quotes. But breakfasts of pancakes, eggs and bacon and chicken and biscuits were called high-carbohydrate meals when in fact both are high in fat.

McCall's well-rated "25 Ways to Eat Chocolate and Not Gain Weight," (Sept. '94) gave readers permission to indulge as long as portion size was respected. But in "Lose Three Pounds in One Weekend!" (Dec. '94) a health spa worker who had no nutrition credentials made two statements, "Holiday weight is mostly caused by water retention" and "Avoid alcohol . . . [it] weakens your diet resolve," both of which are not necessarily true. Also, the article erroneously referred to olives and hummus as being "low fat."

Health received an 82 percent accuracy rating, up from a FAIR (75%) rating in the last survey. One article in particular, "The Bran News About Rice" (May/June '93), was well rated. But when it came to scientific interpretation, *Health* occasionally struggled to present balanced reports. For example, in "Is Iron Hard on Your Heart?" (March/April '93), a USDA nutrition researcher was quoted as saying that ". . . in the United States there's never been a relationship shown between lowering cholesterol and lengthening your life." The quote, taken in context, implied that no benefit would be derived from lowering elevated cholesterol levels; but, according to ACSH advisor Victor Herbert, M.D., "There is unequivocal evidence that people with high cholesterol levels have higher death rates from cholesterol-related heart attacks."

Magazines Rated Fair (70% to 79% Accuracy)

New Woman remained a FAIR (77% accurate) source of nutrition information while improving on its past rating of 74 percent. "Have Yourself a Fat Christmas" (Dec. '94) erred in its throw-in-the-towel, holiday-weight-gain-is-inevitable stance. Interestingly, an article with a conflicting message ("Getting Over Overeating") had appeared in an earlier issue (Dec. '93). The 1993 piece was an interesting take on emotional connections to overeating. It was, in fact, as objective and balanced as preliminary-research reporting can be, according to Judge Berman-Levine. The 1993 article lost credibility only for implying that sugar was a mood-altering culprit for all individuals. Thus, on the whole, *New Woman*'s message seems rather inconsistent.

Men's Health, new to the survey, was found to be 77 percent accurate. "Burn Fat Faster" (Nov. '94) was a summary of fat-burning techniques that work. It was generally a balanced and thorough report but lost points for failing to document sources. For example, the statement, "Studies have shown that overweight people consume . . . more of their calories in the evening" needed a reference or expert backup. "Get What You Need: A Man's Guide to Vitamin and Mineral Supplements" (Nov. '93) recommended antioxidant supplements to prevent wrinkles and disease, advice the scientific consensus does not support for all individuals. One minor error in the piece was the definition of free radicals as "damaging oxygen molecules." Free radicals are not oxygen molecules, but by-products created when the body uses oxygen.

Vogue scored a 77 percent accuracy rating, up from 75 percent in the last survey. "The Death of Dieting" (May '93) was a well-researched report that included the author's own personal testimonial about the shortcomings of commercial weight-loss programs. It received an almost flawless rating. "Milk Under Attack" (March '93), on the other hand, received a mediocre rating. That article incorrectly suggested that babies raised on nondairy formulas cannot rely on vegetables to supply calcium; and advice to give children whole milk until age 12 ran counter to the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation to switch to low-fat milk after age two.

A *Vogue* piece entitled "Now An Even Stronger Case for Vitamin E" (Aug. '93) advised readers to take vitamin E pills for cardiovascular protection. The research on which the article was based was likely "Vitamin E Consumption and The Risk of Coronary Disease in Women," a study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1993 that actually advised *against* taking vitamin E supplements.

In a case reminiscent of the previous survey, in which *Vogue* was seen to have sacrificed accu-

racy for trendiness, “Dieting to Extremes: Tipping the Scales” (Jan. ’94) was a major source of point loss. The low-carbohydrate Montignac diet described in the piece was based on unproved assumptions such as, “Eat all you want but only the right foods and in the right combinations,” and, “Exercise is irrelevant.”

Runner’s World dropped from its previous 77 percent rating to one of 74 percent. Plagued by problems of oversimplification of complex issues and failure to cite sources, this magazine, as it had in the past, continued to single out certain foods and promote nutrient supplementation as keys to running faster and living longer. One article, “Fruit Force” (Aug. ’93), said that eating guava lowers cholesterol levels. How much guava, what other dietary or lifestyle changes were necessary and the source of the research were all undocumented. (In the overall scheme of health promotion, of course, the promotion of the benefits of eating fruit is correct.)

A single study was used by *Runner’s World* as evidence that antioxidant supplements “keep your body’s cells from ‘rusting.’” Articles repeatedly failed to cite their sources of information: “Futuristic Fluids” (July ’93) failed to attribute numerous things, including such statements as, “90 percent of the US population isn’t getting the currently recommended daily intake of 50 micrograms of chromium.” The article also endorsed a commercial supplement for what was referred to as athletes’ higher-than-normal chromium requirements—an unfounded assertion.

One Magazine Rated Poor (Below 70% Accuracy)

Cosmopolitan, with a 69 percent accuracy rating (up from 62 percent), was found to be an unreliable source of nutrition information. It was the only magazine in the survey to be rated POOR (below 70%). While *Cosmo* seemed to run fewer fad diets than in previous years, no other magazine was as conspicuously lax about its credibility quotient.

Factual inaccuracies in *Cosmopolitan*’s “Dieter’s Notebook” column (April ’94) included a recommendation to conquer depression with spinach—an oversimplification based on a preliminary report. *Cosmo* also consistently failed to document sources of information, as in its “Top 10 Fat Burners” roundup (Nov. ’94): “A pinch of chili powder or splash of Tabasco may increase your post-meal metabolic rate significantly, according to some studies.” According to Judge Berman-Levine, this piece “suffered from the ‘research suggests’ syndrome; i.e., it continually referred to research to convince the audience with no hint as to the source so that the consumer could read the research for

himself or herself." The same "Dieter's Notebook" column contained excerpts from food-as-medicine guru Jean Carper's book endorsing garlic supplements for their "mood-lifting ability," an unsubstantiated claim.

Blatantly unscientific was "Do You or Don't You Need Vitamins and Minerals?" (March '93), which was written by a physician to promote nutrient cure-alls. The notion of a nutritional gap between needs and actual consumption is false according to national food-consumption survey data. Those data show no widespread nutrient deficiencies; moreover, nutrition experts always recommend food over pills whenever nutrient intake levels fall short of requirements.

Cosmopolitan's physician-author admonished the readership to supplement 15 different vitamins and minerals, stating that young, active women "need them all." Misguided advice to take 100 milligrams of vitamin B_6 daily to "magically" alleviate PMS has not been clinically proved, and that amount could be toxic if taken over long periods of time.[3] According to *Human Nutrition*, that quantity of vitamin B_6 has, in fact, resulted in neurologic damage.

The article further recommended that readers have a medical nutritional therapist (a spurious credential) conduct blood tests to detect nutrient deficiencies. Such tests, however, are not always valid indicators of vitamin or mineral status. Articles such as "Do You or Don't You Need Vitamins and Minerals? do a disservice to *Cosmopolitan*'s readers. In fact, *Cosmo*'s articles, consistently poorly rated as they were, suggest a strong need for real improvement under the magazine's new editorial regime.

How Magazines Stack Up by Target Audience

This ACSH survey found that, as a group, "consumer-focused" *Consumer Reports*, *Parents* and *Reader's Digest* scored highest, racking up a 91 percent score overall. There was no appreciable difference in accuracy among the three despite a range in individual scores from 95 to 88 percent. We conclude that the factual approach used in these publications triumphed over other magazines' fluffier approach of using nutrition for ornamentation, sales appeal or anything other than education—all approaches common in lower scoring publications.

The second-highest rated group—the "home-focused" magazines—consisted of *Better Homes and Gardens, Cooking Light* and *Good Housekeeping.* These were, collectively, 88 percent accurate—a score slightly lower than, but comparable to, the consumer-focused magazines' overall score. Within

this group, however, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Cooking Light* outscored *Good Housekeeping* to a statistically significant extent.

"Health-focused" and "women's" magazines, as groups, both received 82 percent overall accuracy ratings; both groups were significantly less accurate from a statistical standpoint than either the consumer-focused or home-focused groups. Some notable individual health and women's magazines were rated as GOOD, however; and ACSH suggests that these magazines are more likely to be sources of reliable nutrition information.

American Health and *Prevention* led the health-focused magazines with similar ratings (88% and 87%, respectively); and they were statistically better than *Health, Men's Health* and *Runner's World.* On the whole, the health-focused magazines tended to publish the highest volume of nutrition information.

Glamour was the highest scoring women's magazine, followed by *Mademoiselle, Self, Woman's Day*, *Redbook* and *McCall's.* According to the survey's statistician, Dr. Lee, the low-scoring *New Woman, Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* were significantly worse than any of the others and so pulled the women's magazines down as a group.

A summary of general comments based on the judges' reactions to each magazine is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. General Comments

MAGAZINE	COMMENTS
Consumer Reports	Straight-facts, no-fluff product-analysis articles.
Better Homes and Gardens	Specializes in sensible strategies to balance the diet.
Parents	Thoroughly documents its expert opinions; concern for educating its readership is evident.
Cooking Light	Interesting topics; balanced reporting; nutrition experts edit and sometimes write arti cles.
Glamour	Tackles issues using expert backup; consistently provides thoroughly researched hands-on advice.
Reader's Digest	Strives to raise readers' nutrition IQs.
Mademoiselle	Accurate headlines; generally praiseworthy reporting.
American Health	Makes sophisticated subject matter easy to read.
Prevention	High-volume nutrition reporting generally hits target.

Self	Performed well in food facts articles; needed to weed out confusing, unconventional views.
Woman's Day	High proportion of expertly written articles flawed by missing documentation.
Good Housekeeping	Food facts articles fared well; accuracy sometimes wavered in controversial areas.
Redbook	A mixed bag; needs to fact- and source-check more thoroughly to maintain points.
McCall's	When certain unconventional sources or platforms were cited, its otherwise good score fell.
Health	Tries hard to educate but occasionally misses the mark when discussing research.
New Woman	Articles and nutrition column vary from good to poor with different authors.
Men's Health	Newcomer on the right track. Needs to document sources and distinguish between conventional and unconventional wisdom.
Vogue	Its low-carbohydrate weight-loss diet belongs in the 1970s with other outmoded fash ions. Physician columnist interprets science expertly but some nutrition recommenda tions were slightly flawed.
Runner's World	Espouses supplementation beyond the RDAs. Should provide sources to readers instead of repeatedly saying "research suggests" or "studies show."
Cosmopolitan	Exploits nutrition and its readership when it twists facts for cover-story appeal. Needs a nutrition makeover from head to toe; suffers from "research suggests" syndrome and oversimplification of research.

ACSH's Advice to Magazines and to Consumers

This latest survey found that the accuracy of nutrition reporting in magazines has definitely improved. Dr. Manfred Kroger has served as a judge in every ACSH survey so far; he attributes the improvement to the fact that "Reporters, writers and editors [are] doing a better job because they recognize [that] ACSH and the public are watching them and their work." Dr. Kroger adds that "The media are increasingly relying on experts to scrutinize their output before going public, a welcome trend."

Outlandish claims, endorsements of fad diets and gross misinterpretations of scientific research—all commonly seen in earlier surveys—have for the most part been replaced by balanced, science-based reports designed to promote nutrition literacy.

Point losses in this latest survey fell broadly into three categories:

• First, some magazines made the mistake of basing entire reports on the advice of self-described "nutrition experts." Merely claiming credibility on a subject doesn't make someone an expert, even if that someone has written a book. Any advice that bucks the scientific consensus of

established rules (nutrition advice that runs contrary to the Recommended Dietary Allowances, for example) should be viewed with caution. As judge Berman-Levine states, "Criticism of the RDAs is sometimes warranted, as they are only periodically updated and newer evidence is always coming out. However, I object to the writer who criticizes the RDA in a manner that clearly shows he or she has never read the document and is only mimicking the unwarranted criticisms he or she has heard."

• Second, in some cases quoting advocacy groups such as Public Voice, the Council for Responsible Nutrition and the Center for Science in the Public Interest threw reports off balance. Groups of this sort are often quoted as a way to present opposing views. Their comments are sometimes valid, sometimes contrary to scientific thinking; but to represent their views as "the other side" is inaccurate. In actuality, they represent only one to five percent of the scientific community. As judge Manfred Kroger remarked, "The public should always be informed that the proportion of the scientific community these groups actually represent is nominal."

• Third, ideas intended to persuade were not thoroughly documented. Unless the information in an article was already well established, ACSH's judges wanted to know the sources of that information.

In conclusion, nutrition reporting in magazines is becoming increasingly sophisticated as research findings continue to show up in their pages. Magazines are moving away from touting crash diets and are starting to provide more hands-on information. They are telling their readers how to fix poor eating habits and helping them make warranted lifestyle changes in accord with public health policy.

ACSH advises consumers who read magazines whose nutrition reporting was rated FAIR or POOR—or who read magazines not included in this survey—to be on the alert for questionable information. After all, as the Food and Nutrition Science Alliance (FANSA) has pointed out, it can be tempting to reach for easy answers in one's quest for better health. FANSA is a coalition of food and nutrition professionals and scientists whose member organizations include the American Institute of Nutrition (AIN), the American Society for Clinical Nutrition (ASCN), the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) and the American Dietetics Association (ADA). FANSA's guide for spotting exaggerated or distorted "junk science" alerts readers to the following red flags:

- recommendations that promise a quick fix;

- dire warnings of danger from a single product or regimen;
- claims that sound too good to be true;
- dramatic statements that are refuted by reputable scientific organizations;
- recommendations made to help sell a product;
- recommendations based on studies published without peer review.
- recommendations that ignore differences among individuals or groups

Textbooks are good fact-checking references. Additionally, the National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics Consumer Hotline (1-800-366-1655) provides free, reliable information and explanations of nutrition issues. Finally, ACSH offers a variety of consumer-friendly informational booklets on current topics.

ACSH commends those magazines whose nutrition reporting was rated EXCELLENT or GOOD. Their coverage can positively influence the nation's nutrition IQ by providing factual, objective information most of the time. ACSH encourages the powers that be at those magazines rated FAIR or POOR to assign nutrition topics to writers, researchers and editors who understand science. By so doing, those at the helms of those magazines can achieve better consistency as well as better quality in their nutrition articles, with the ultimate goal of educating their readers and stemming the spread of misinformation.

Features of an Accurate Article

Articles rated highly in this survey:

- offered practical advice for lifestyle change;
- avoided recommending lifestyle change based on a single study;
- carried headlines that matched the article's content;
- promoted established principles such as The Food Guide Pyramid's inclusion of a variety of foods and the RDA as the "gold standard" of nutrient requirements;
- quoted credible nutrition sources (including registered dietitians; organizations such as ACSH, ADA, AIN, ASCN, FANSA and IFT; and researchers, food science / nutrition professors and other credentialed professionals affiliated with accredited institutions—such as universities and medical research centers—who adhere to conventional edicts);
- did not single out individual foods as good or bad but looked at the total diet;

- cited the percentage of the scientific community that consumer-advocacy groups actually represent when using those advocacy groups as sources of information and opinion.

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2. Circulation figures for *Consumer Reports* were obtained from Consumers' Union.

3. Food and Nutrition Board, National Research Council. *Recommended Dietary Allowances*, 10th Edition. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1989. pp. 144-146.

[1]Nutrition Trends Survey 1995. American Dietetics Association, Chicago, IL. p. 5.

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[3]Food and Nutrition Board, National Research Council *Recommended Dietary Allowances*, 10th Edition. National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 1989. pp. 144–146.