



Fact-Checking Health Fads

We asked a doctor for the lowdown on the hottest health trends for the new year—from alkaline water to salt caves.

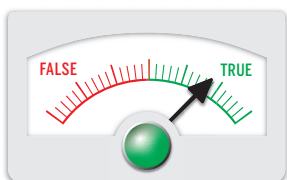
By SANDRA SHELLEY | Illustration by JOHN HERSEY

AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, EVERYONE SEEMS TO HAVE ADVICE about how to get healthier and get your year off to a good start. But for those worn out from the busy holiday season, the list of ideas can seem daunting—and some of the suggestions downright silly. We asked Dr. Steve Pearman, vice president and senior medical director of Sentara Medical Group and a family practitioner in Virginia Beach, to fact-check the science behind some common health fads. Here's what we learned:

Belief #1:
Practicing mindfulness relieves stress.

Mindfulness involves being in the present moment, without judgment. The relaxation technique, which has been practiced for more than 2,500 years, focuses on awareness of breathing and other body sensations. “This is probably one of the soundest practices that people can do as far as well-being,” says Dr. Pearman. “Evidence supports the benefits, which include reducing anxiety, depression, pain, and stress.” When left unchecked, long-term stress can impact the immune system and lead to serious medical issues like heart disease and uncontrolled diabetes.

“Mindfulness is something you can do throughout the day,” he adds. Pearman sometimes takes a “purposeful pause” of three deep breaths



before he enters a patient room. The practice allows him to “shut the door on the email or whatever I was doing beforehand and focus on the patient on the other side of that door.”

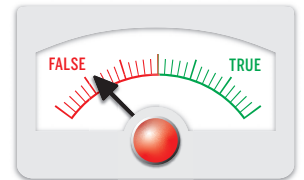
Belief #2:
Alkaline water balances your pH and makes you healthier.

Beyoncé drinks it, and so does Tom Brady. But what is alkaline water and how does it work? Pure water has a neutral pH of 7, on a scale of 1 to 14. Specially processed alkaline water registers higher on the pH scale, meaning it's less acidic. Supporters of bottled alkaline water say it can help you can reduce the acid in your bloodstream and improve metabolism, allowing you to increase energy, slow aging, reduce bone loss, or even “starve” cancer cells.

Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence that alkaline water is better for you than regu-

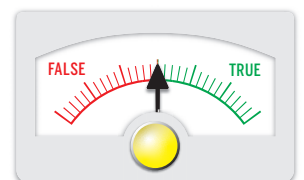
lar tap water, says Pearman. As it turns out, the body manages very well on its own. “The body regulates the pH in the blood stream by using the kidneys as a filter to regulate the acidity of the blood. If your blood becomes too acidic, the body gets rid of carbon dioxide through the lungs,” he says. Additionally, “The stomach modifies all food and liquids that are ingested. The acid in the stomach will re-acidify alkaline water before it is absorbed.”

While hydration is important, he says, “I think water’s water as long as it doesn’t have impurities in it.”



Belief #3:
Regular visits to a salt cave or room can draw toxins from body, reduce inflammation, and reduce the symptoms of asthma, allergies, and some skin conditions.

In these spa enclaves, the walls are made of Himalayan salt bricks, and grains of salt crunch beneath your feet. You recline in a zero-gravity chair and inhale the NaCl as candles flicker and soothing music plays. Helpful? The jury is still out. “The claimed benefits of salt caves



PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK



are similar to those of a salt lamp: Negative ions emitted by the salts are inhaled and absorbed by the skin and draw out toxins and impurities,” says Pearman. Regrettably, “There is no conclusive research that demonstrates these benefits.”

But for those who enjoy the relaxation aspect of salt caves, he says, “If it makes you feel better, great.” He cautions that patients with conditions like heart failure and high blood pressure should check with their doctors first, and all visitors should drink lots of water. “Most salt caves are very dry environments.”

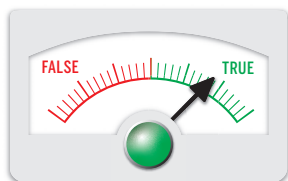
As a side note, Pearman says, science does support the use of Dead Sea Salts to treat psoriasis and acne.

Belief #4:
Sensory deprivation tanks can relieve stress, calm your nervous system, and help your body heal.

Filled with salt-water to improve buoyancy, these soundproof tanks offer a respite from our busy lives.

While studies on the topic have been limited, overall evidence suggests that floating may improve mood, blood pressure, and stress hormone levels. Pearman gives it a thumbs up. “I believe that people are on hamster wheels, and anything they can do to relax themselves and turn down the volume is helpful,” he says. “Floating in the water is one of the things that helps all our body muscles relax.” Muscle relaxation can help fight the vicious cycle of chronic pain—where pain makes you tighten your muscles, ultimately leading to more pain and inflammation, he says.

Floating is not for everyone, though. For some, “the experience can feel claustrophobic and create anxiety.”



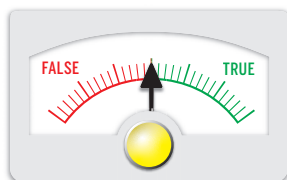
Belief #5:
No pain, no gain—you should be going to HIIT classes.

First used by Scandinavian Olympic athletes, high intensity interval training alternates periods of intensity during a cardio workout, usually in bursts of 30 seconds to three minutes. The high intensity portions, which foster higher heart rates, are followed by lower intensity exercises that allow for recovery.

Studies show that interval training provides more benefits “than just going at it hard,” says Pearman. “You can also obtain the same benefits in less time than you would from prolonged periods of sustained lower intensity exercise.” Along with improving cardiovascular health, HIIT burns more calories and releases more endorphins—the feel-good hormones—than regular workouts. He notes that it’s important to listen to your body to avoid injury.

That said, with current recommendations at 150 minutes of exercise per week, “Any activity is better than no activity,” he says.

“My general advice to people is do something you enjoy, if it’s a walk, bike ride, swimming, whatever.”



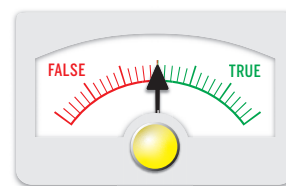
Don’t pick an exercise you hate because you think it’s better than the other one. Do something rather than nothing.”



Belief #6:
Practicing an alcohol-free “Dryuary” (or doing any other detox/cleanse) resets your body and improves your health.

“Alcohol is one of those things that has a continuum: Excess is not good, and moderation is probably not that harmful. There are some studies that show a glass of red wine is probably better for you than not drinking red wine,” he says.

In his practice, he’s noticed that when people give up things like alcohol or pain medications, they suddenly become aware of how bad it was making them feel. “Sometimes you can’t see the forest for the trees, and you’re putting up with feeling a certain way and then realizing it’s self-imposed.” He draws a comparison to those who give up certain foods or habits for Lent. “People go through an emotional, spiritual, physical activity that seems to kind of reset, and I think there’s some benefit to that that we may not be able to prove scientifically.”



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—Dr. Steve Pearman

While health trends come and go, Pearman’s advice is timeless: get enough sleep, eat a balanced diet, exercise, cope with stress, drink lots of water, keep up your health screenings, limit alcohol, and make time to connect with others. “Most people are looking for the magic bullet. And having been a physician for 34 years now, I’ve realized there aren’t a lot of magic bullets out there,” he says. “Most people who have healthy lives and have a good sense of well-being, it starts with moderation.”