

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Will An Apple A Day Keep The Doctor Away ?”

For decades, we have heard the old adage that “an apple a day will keep the doctor away.” But, is there any scientific proof for this? Detox diets purport to work through “clean eating.” That typically means eating a strict diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and raw nuts and seeds, plus lots of water. But, there's no evidence detox and cleanse diets actually rid the body of toxins, or that they're necessary. The Mediterranean diet, which is heavy in fruits, vegetables, fish, whole grains, and healthy unsaturated fats (olive oil), and low in processed foods, red meat, and saturated and trans fats, has confirmed health benefits by many studies. In 2018, Dr. John Murphy published an article on the very subject of eating an apple a day to avoid the doctor and here is what he found out. Further, Dr. Matthew A. Davis wrote, “To our knowledge, the association between daily apple consumption and use of health-care services has never been rigorously examined. Although some may jest, considering the relatively low cost of apples (currently \$1.13 per pound of Red Delicious apples), a prescription for apple consumption could potentially reduce national health-care spending if the aphorism holds true.” Dr. Davis and colleagues analyzed data from 8,399 eligible adults who completed a dietary recall questionnaire as part of the 2007-2008 and 2009-2010 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Of these individuals, 753 (9%) self-identified as daily apple eaters (those who consumed at least 1 small apple or 149 g of raw apple per day) and 7,646 (91%) reported they did not eat an apple a day. The authors classified “keeping the doctor away” as successfully avoiding two or more physician visits in the past year. Results showed apple eaters had higher educational attainment, were more likely to be from a racial or ethnic minority and were less likely to smoke compared with non-apple eaters. But, after the researchers adjusted for sociodemographic and health-related characteristics, they found that apple eaters did not significantly “keep the doctor away” any better than non-apple eaters. Similarly, apple eaters were no better than non-apple eaters at avoiding overnight hospital stays or mental health visits. However, apple eaters were marginally more successful at avoiding prescription medications. Davis said, “Our findings suggest that the promotion of apple consumption may have limited benefit in reducing national health-care spending. In the age of evidence-based assertions, however, there may be merit to saying, “An apple a day keeps the pharmacist away.”

In the America that I love, we will continue to enjoy our apples and we will avoid extreme or fad diets, emphasize fresh fruits and vegetables in moderate portions and exercise regularly. So, another myth falls by the wayside.

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