The Healthy Skeptic: Cutting through the Hype about Your Health

Robert Davis
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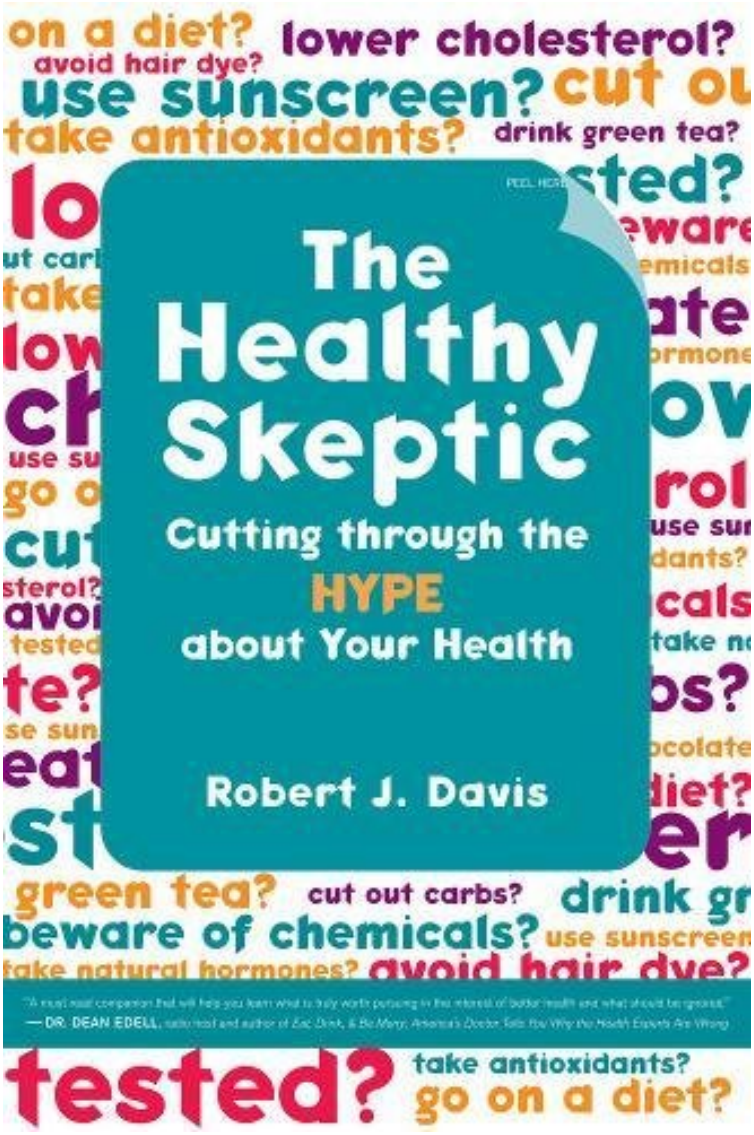

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Robert Davis : The Healthy Skeptic: Cutting through the Hype about Your Health before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Healthy Skeptic: Cutting through the Hype about Your Health:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fun and important readBy R. PyronThis book is interesting and inspires to further investigation and action. I am already doing both to improve my health. Davis provokes us to look behind the health messages that bombard us every day to see why they come, who they stand to benefit (often not us),

how we can determine in that area what might be best for our health. I am recommending it to others already.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Something to think about...By CbeeeI want to encourage a healthy lifestyle for my family, but it is difficult with all the changing data from the news media, web sites, etc. This is a good book to help you make informed decisions on a variety of health care issues. I suggest reading it to help you come to your own decisions about what is the best choice to make for your lifestyle.16 of 16 people found the following review helpful. No regulation + corporate/ new-age greed = Darwinian selection of the gullible and uninformedBy Alice FriedemannThis book will help you evaluate health claims of western and "natural" food, supplements, and medicine. Both often exaggerate, lie, and abuse statistics to convince you to buy whatever they're selling.The news media unfortunately gets a lot of its material from manufacturers or trade groups rather than scientific studies, so you always have to be skeptical of what information from newspapers, magazines, and TV.Nor is the government protecting you, so you can't assume that what is allowed on labels is true. In the good old days, the FDA used to only allow health claims backed by significant scientific agreement or an authoritative statement from the National Academy of Sciences. But now the FDA has yielded to pressures from industry that allows "qualified" claims with limited evidence.If you've been prescribed an expensive drug, or one with potentially life-threatening side effects, Davis suggests you can read the original scientific papers - if you do, I recommend also getting Woloshin's book "Know Your Chances" to help you interpret it.Luckily for you, Davis has done the hard work for you and investigates many widely used and prescribed remedies, such as Lunestra, statins, sunscreen, chemicals, dieting, anti-aging pills, and more.After reading this book I would never take any medication or supplements without doing in-depth research, because the side effects can range from unpleasant to life-threatening. And many drugs cost a huge amount of money, yet lower my odds of getting a disease by only one or two percent. Though you'd never know this from the ads, which might claim 33% -- Davis explains the math of how they can make such an outrageous claim and get away with it.Healthy FoodDavis said many of his friends ask him what foods are the best to eat so they can stockpile these "superfoods". Davis tells them there is no such thing as a superfood - just try to eat as wide a variety as possible of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, legumes, and nuts (in moderation). Avoid red meat, white rice, white bread, and processed or junk food.The reason there aren't any "superfoods" is because all food has multiple nutrients that interact with each other and with other food you've eaten that affect your body in many ways. It's impossible to tease out the effect of individual components.The FDA now allows "weasel" words to make "structure/function" claims without any proof at all. So "lowers cholesterol" is not allowed, but the corporation or quack can get around this with "helps maintain healthy cholesterol levels". Some other weasel phrases: "maintains heart health" and "provides immune support". Unless a product is labeled clearly and unambiguously with a statement that it prevents a condition, ignore the label. A legitimate label can be found on whole grain products, because several decades of peer-reviewed scientific research has shown whole grains reduce your odds of getting heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes.CholesterolI was surprised to learn the decades long Framington findings on high cholesterol applied only to middle-aged people - and that after that the risk of high cholesterol declines. By age 70, there's no relationship between high cholesterol and death from heart disease. After 80, low cholesterol is correlated with a higher risk of death from all causes.And even for the middle-aged, the risks of high cholesterol are exaggerated.* A 40 year old man with a high cholesterol level of 240 mg/dL but no other risk factors and no history of heart disease only has a 2% increased risk of heart disease over the next 10 years.* The same guy at 180 mg/dL has a 1% risk.* For a high cholesterol 50 year old woman who doesn't smoke or have high blood pressure, there's only a 1% heart disease risk over the next ten years.* A 50-year-old man with normal cholesterol who smokes and has high blood pressure has a 13% chance of heart disease within 10 years, and 22% if he also has high cholesterol.Bottom line: you can't view cholesterol levels in isolation.StatinsStatins mainly help those who already have heart disease and only reduce the odds 1.5% for those who don't. The main group they help are high risk men between 30 and 69.Women without heart disease don't seem to be helped at all.And statins have some potential bad side effects, including liver damage, muscle weakness, impaired memory and thinking, and possibly cancer (more research needs to be done). Yet many are calling for statins to be taken preemptively for those in good health.SunscreenYour first line of defense is staying out of the sun between 10 and 4 or covering up with a big hat, and long sleeves and pants. Your last line of defense should be sunscreen. Sunscreen has not been proven to guard against melanoma and there isn't much evidence that sunscreen reduces the risk of basal cell carcinoma. People usually don't put enough sunscreen on, and worse yet, stay out in the sun longer than the sunscreen will protect them. Very few are formulated to protect from UVA which is also damaging.Perhaps a little sun is good for you since it's hard to get enough vitamin D from food. Adults need roughly 2,000 IU. Ssalmon has 400 iu's, one cup of milk (500 iu's) and you've still got to get 1100 iu's to get somehow. But you can get thousands of IU's with some sunshine in 15 minutes or less.Multi-vitamins and supplementsRecently, several studies of long-term vitamin use did not provide evidence that taking vitamins prevents disease.Studies that have shown no benefits of multivitamins or other supplements (1)Years...# of people in study...Study Name 4...35,333...The Selenium and Vitamin E Cancer Prevention Trial 8...161,000...Multivitamin Use and Risk of Cancer and Cardiovascular Disease in the Women's Health Initiative Cohorts10...15,000...Physicians' Health Study II Vitamins E C in the prevention of cardiovascular disease in Men10...232,606...Mortality in Randomized Trials of Antioxidant Supplements for Primary and Secondary

Prevention(1) Tara Parker-Pope. Feb 16, 2009. Vitamin Pills: A False Hope? New York Times.TeflonWhat's dangerous is the intermediate chemical perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) that is only around during its production, not in your pots and pans (and clothes, carpets, food packaging, and insulation on wires and cables, etc - Teflon is used in many products).Living a long and healthy lifeA landmark study of thousands of healthy people over 70 identified regular exercise, both aerobic and resistance training as "the single most important thing an older person can do to remain healthy". Other big factors: staying mentally active, socially connected, don't smoke or drink alcohol to excess, learn how to handle stress well, get appropriate screening tests, keep your blood sugar and blood pressure levels normal, and eat a diet rich in whole grains, vegetables, fish, fruit, and legumes. You could do all of the above and still get run over by a truck or be tripped up by your genetic weaknesses, but at least you'll feel better while you're still around.RiskWhatever you're afraid of, it's important to put risk into perspective. The main risk of injury and death you face every day comes from cars. Every year more than 2,500,000 Americans are injured and 43,000 killed - cars are the main cause of death for those under 35. So find out the stats before you worry yourself to death.And above all, ask the right questions:1) What kind of a study was it? Order is from least to most credible:a. Test-tube researchb. Animal studiesc. Population studies (i.e.d diet in Finland versus Japan)d. Short-term human experimentse. Case-control studies - similar people, but one group has the disease and the others don'tf. Cohort-healthy people examined for years (i.e. Framington Heart Study other long-term studies)g. Randomized clinical trials, double-blind2) How big was the effect?a. For example, the risk of breast cancer for post menopausal drinkers is 1.3, or 30% greater. 1.3 is so small it could be partly or completely due to other causes. Epidemiologists think a relative risk less than 3 is small, especially if there's no corroboration. Relative risk of 1 = no increase, 2 = 100%, 3 = 300% etcb. Next determine the ABSOLUTE DIFFERENCE IN RISK. If people exposed to substance X have 3 times the chance of disease Y, but only 3 in 1,000,000 exposed get disease Y - so what?3) Could the finding be a fluke - chance?4) Who was studied? Men over 70? If the group isn't similar to you, you may not need to worry5) Is there a good biological explanation of why X happens?6) Who paid for the research?7) Was it peer-reviewed?8) What about other studies?It's up to you now to investigate health claims. Below Davis provides to websites with good information, where there's no profit motive.[...]

It happens every day: we pick up a newspaper or magazine or turn on the television and are bombarded with urgent advice about how to stay healthy. Lose weight! Lower your cholesterol! Early detection saves lives! Sunscreen prevents cancer! But in many cases, pronouncements we rarely think to question turn out to be half-truths that are being pushed by various individuals or groups to advance their own agendas. The Healthy Skeptic explores who these health promoters aremdash;from journalists and celebrities to industry-funded groups and consumer activistsmdash;what their motives are, and how they are spinning us in ways we often don't realize.This treasure trove of little-known facts, written by a seasoned health reporter, provides invaluable tips, tools, and resources to help readers think more critically about what they're being told. Becoming a healthy skeptic is vital, Davis argues, because following the right advice can have a profound impact on overall health and longevity.IN TEN ENTERTAINING CHAPTERS, ROBERT J. DAVIS DISCUSSES:* Diets and why they don't work* Dietary supplements* The campaign to reduce cholesterol* Celebrity exhortations to "get tested"* Sunscreen and its promoters' claims* The antichemical activists

.com Most Americans get their health information from the media: reports on the evening news, magazine and newspaper articles, popular websites, as well as a flood of advertisements from pharmaceutical and health product manufacturers. How is the average person supposed to cut through the marketing hype and get to the truth? According to award-winning journalist Robert Davis, Ph.D.--author of The Healthy Skeptic-- skepticism, closer scrutiny, and some trustworthy resources can go a long way to help us separate fact from fiction about the latest health information and claims. --Lauren Nemroff .com Exclusive An Interview with Robert J. Davis, Ph.D .com: What is a "healthy skeptic"? Davis: A healthy skeptic is someone who takes time to critically evaluate all health advice, regardless of whether it comes from the media, a drug company, a non-profit health group, the government, or anyone else. Wersquo;re flooded with more information and advice than ever about how to stay healthy. While some of it is solid, much of it is misleading, and some is potentially harmful. Because prevention is so important--taking the right steps can greatly enhance our health and the quality of our lives--we canrsquo;t afford to let ourselves be swayed by spin. .com: If a news article or TV ad touts the efficacy of a new drug based on "clinical trials" or "clinical testing," is this information reliable? Davis: To be approved and marketed, prescription drugs must be subjected to rigorous clinical testing in humans. However, sometimes we see media reports hyping early-stage research on a drug--it killed cancer cells in a test-tube, for example, or reversed diabetes in rodents--and wersquo;re led to believe that a cure is around the corner. In fact, preliminary findings such as these frequently donrsquo;t pan out upon further investigation. Thatrsquo;s why when we hear that "research shows" something, itrsquo;s important to know what kind of research wersquo;re talking about: Is it an early-stage experiment testing only safety, for example, or a long-term randomized trial involving thousands of people? Therersquo;s a big difference. The term "clinically proven" is often used

misleadingly to promote herbal remedies and other dietary supplements. Unlike prescription drugs, supplements donrsquo;t have to undergo rigorous testing before they can be sold and marketed. Supplement manufacturers may conduct small, short-term, poorly designed experiments and point to them as "proof" that their products are safe and effective. And in some cases, the "clinical trials" cited by supplement makers involve a product thatrsquo;s entirely different from the one being marketed. .com: In your book you reveal some eye-opening revelations about specific kinds of products that most of us eat, apply or wear everyday, such a chocolate, vitamins, sunscreen, and cosmetics. Many of these products, like sunscreens, for example, even have seals of approval from important sounding medical organizations. Are these endorsements trustworthy? Davis: In many cases, no. Product manufacturers typically pay non-profit health groups for their seals of approval, an arrangement that sets up a potential conflict of interest. Sometimes the requirements for earning a seal are so lax as to be practically meaningless. In other cases, a seal is offered exclusively to one company or a limited number of companies. The result is the misleading implication that the product(s) carrying the seal are superior to all those without it. Despite considerable criticism of this practice, it continues because it produces revenue for health groups and provides marketing benefits to companies. .com: Why should citizens be concerned about the funding sources of scientific research? Davis: Increasingly, studies are funded by groups such as drug companies, food producers, dietary supplement manufacturers, or consumer activists, which have a vested interest in the outcome. Such sponsorship doesnrsquo;t necessarily mean the research is biased or invalid, but it does at least raise the possibility that the study'smethods or conclusions were directly or indirectly influenced by the funder's agenda. Most researchers will tell you that the funding source has no influence on their findings--and in many cases that's true. But various analyses have shown that industry-funded research is more likely to produce results favorable to the funder than research not funded by industry. One possible explanation is that industry-funded research that is unfavorable to the funder may be buried and never published. Also, industry funders of research tends to gravitate toward scientists who seem likely, based on their previous research and opinions, to reach conclusions consistent with the funder's aims. While such sponsorship is essential--it allows scientists to conduct valuable studies that may not otherwise be possible--we need to take it into account when interpreting research findings. .com: Can you give an example of a commonly encountered health claim or rule of thumb that is overstated or oversimplified? What alternative wording would be more accurate? Davis: One that we hear all the time is that sunscreen protects against skin cancer. That's actually only partially true. Sunscreen has been shown to protect against a (generally) non-lethal form of skin cancer known as squamous cell cancer. But when it comes to melanoma--the type thatrsquo;s most often deadly-- the jury is still out. Yet, we often are told by various health promoters (including some who receive funding from the sunscreen industry) that sunscreen is a proven protector and should be a first line of defense against all forms of skin cancer. In fact, staying out of the sun, wearing a hat, and covering up are the best ways to protect yourself. Sunscreen should be a second line of defense. .com: In "The Healthy Skeptic" you cast a pretty critical eye on your own profession--health journalism. Why is that? And, what kinds of changes in health reporting would you like to see? Davis: According to surveys, what we learn about health--especially prevention--tends to come mainly from the news media. Too often, this information is incomplete, oversimplified, and devoid of context. One problem, of course, is a lack of time and space; therersquo;s only so much that even the best health journalist can squeeze into a 100-word news brief or a 20-second TV clip. But therersquo;s also a larger issue: a fundamental difference between science and journalism. Science involves small, incremental steps that gradually get us closer to the truth. Journalism, in contrast, is largely about what is new, interesting, and attention grabbing. When journalists present health research through this prism, as is often the case, we can get a distorted sense of reality. In talks to health journalists, I encourage them to focus more on the big picture. For example, if a particular study shows coffee is bad (or good) for us, how does this square with previous research? Is the study more or less believable than what came before? And how does the risk (or benefit) stack up against others? Is it large enough, in practical terms for us to really care about it? Such information is key to making informed decisions. .com: What can we as consumers do to "separate belief from facts"? What are some trusted resources that the average time-strapped person might tap into for a reality check on the latest health hype? Davis: In my book I list some superb resources that provide straightforward, spin-free information. For example, if yoursquo;re seeking the truth about a particular herb or other dietary supplement, both Consumer Reports and the Mayo Clinic Website offer comprehensive databases that have detailed information about safety and effectiveness. Or if your concern is food and nutrition, the Harvard School of Public Health has a terrific Web site, called Nutrition Source, and there are several excellent health letters, including Nutrition Action and the Tufts Health and Nutrition Letter, which set the record straight. In surveys asking what is most important, respondents typically put their health at or near the top of the list. If we really mean that, it's certainly worth spending a little extra time and effort to check out the health advice and information we're getting. .com: Is it possible to be a healthy skeptic without turning into neurotic worry wart? Davis: Absolutely. In fact, being a healthy skeptic is the antidote to being worry wart. Every day, wersquo;re warned about something--foods, beverages, pesticides, plastics, cell phones, hair dye, Teflon pans and on and on--that allegedly threatens our health and our lives. Trying to heed all or even most of these warnings can be overwhelming. There is, after all, only so much that we can worry about. A healthy skeptic learns to look at each alleged threat in context, asking a) how solid is the evidence? and

b) how big is the risk compared to other, well-established risks (such as smoking)? As a result, wersquo;re able to prioritize, focusing mainly on those measures that are most likely to have the biggest impact. Being a health skeptic entails maintaining perspective so that we donrsquo;t get carried away with our pursuit of health, and in the process, cause ourselves psychological harm. From Booklist*Starred * Award-winning medical journalist Davis has some radical and revolutionary notions when it comes to making decisions about onersquo;s health. His advicemdash;donrsquo;t believe everything you read, and donrsquo;t fall for false claims made by celebrity shillsmdash;calls in question the glut of books, articles, and endorsements that clog media outlets. By taking some most-dearly-held beliefs, such as that blueberries prevent Alzheimerrsquo;s, cholesterol will kill you, slimming down is always good for you, and sunscreen prevents skin cancer, and deconstructing how such myths originated and are soldmdash;sold being the operative word heremdash;he demonstrates ways the average person can avoid following what is at best useless and at worst potentially harmful advice. He writes innbsp;an unpatronizing, reader-friendly style that simplifies the process of divining what is true science out of the hype too often vended by morning newsmagazine shows via paid (it says in fine print) celebrity spokespersons. He suggests that following the money will pretty reliably expose fraud; start with as simple a question as, Who gains from hyping this product/procedure/intervention? Davisrsquo; handy little reference work belongs where everyone can access it. --Donna Chavez ldquo;Simplifies the process of divining what is true science out of the hype. . . . Belongs where everyone can access it.rdquo;