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**13 Old Wives' Tales Exposed**

Do you know what health folklore is fact — and what's fiction?

by Patricia Curtis

At some point in your life, **you realize that Mother mostly knows best**, but some of the things she taught you over the years weren't exactly on target. That includes some of her medical advice, much of which she probably inherited from her own mother. Read on to see what the experts have to say about which old wives' tales are true wisdom and which are a bunch of baloney. (Send this article to Mom when you're done!)

Old wives say: An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Eating an apple is a great way to get essential nutrients into your diet, but no more so than **chowing down on other fruits or vegetables**, according to Sharron Coplin, a registered dietitian and professor of nutrition at Ohio State University. Fresh produce contains antioxidants, which can **lower your risk of heart disease**, stroke, cancer and other diseases. Sure, apples are good for you, but oranges, bananas and mangoes would be just as effective at keeping the doc at bay.

Final verdict: True

Old wives say: If you swallow gum, it takes seven years for your body to digest it.

Nope, says Cynthia Yoshida, M.D., director of the Women's Gastrointestinal Clinic at the University of Virginia. "If you swallow a tooth, a penny or even gum, it goes right through your system," she says. "Although it's sticky, gum does not attach itself to the well-lubricated lining of the gastrointestinal tract."

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: Sitting too close to the television is bad for your eyes.

Getting up close and personal with the tube isn't really harmful, says Anne Summers, M.D., a spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. "It may fatigue your eyes temporarily, but it's not bad for them," she says. "The same goes for reading without adequate light. The fact that people's eyes get worse each year is simply attributable to the **aging eye**."

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: Fish is brain food.

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"Fish is an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids, and that's important in the development of the brain," says Coplin. Research shows that fish eaters have less plaque in their arteries, so they have better blood flow to the brain, which may be associated with **better overall mental function**. In addition, fish contains important B vitamins that help with cognitive ability and memory, says nutritionist Janine Whiteson, author of "Get a Real Food Life."

Final verdict: True

Old wives say: You'll catch a cold if you go outside with wet hair.

This notion is malarkey, says to David Whitaker, D.O., an emergency medicine physician in New Jersey.

"Colds are caused only by viruses," he says. Going outside with a soaking head (or forgetting your jacket on a chilly day) isn't going to make you sick.

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: Eat the crust of the bread — it's especially good for you.

A crumb of bread crust has eight times the amount of cancer-fighting antioxidants as a crumb from another part of the slice, according to a recent study published in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry.

(However, eating the crust won't turn your hair curly or your teeth whiter, as you may have heard.)

Final verdict: True

Old wives say: Stress and spicy foods cause ulcers.

Overconsumption of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as Advil and Aleve, and the bacteria *H. pylori* are the two major causes of ulcers, reports Dr. Yoshida. Stress and eating piquant foods can cause indigestion or even acid reflux, but they don't create ulcers — they just irritate them.

Final verdict: False

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Old wives say: Eating carrots is good for your eyes.

Mom had the right idea but the wrong vegetable. The nutrient lutein — found in small amounts in carrots — has been shown to reduce the severity of the age-related eye disease macular degeneration (one of the top causes of vision loss). Broccoli, spinach and other green leafy vegetables are much better sources.

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: You'll be healthier if your head points to the south when you sleep.

This notion may get its basis from the Chinese practice of **feng shui**, the art of arranging objects in your environment to achieve harmony in life. But according to Whitaker, there's no need to bring a compass to the bedroom — this tale isn't supported by medical fact.

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: Don't cross your eyes; they'll stay that way.

You may look funny when you cross your eyes, but your pupils will be just fine, says Dr. Summers. People with perpetually crossed eyes aren't being punished for making goofy faces. Rather, faulty messages from their brain cause these individuals' eyes to be misaligned.

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: Don't crack your knuckles — it causes arthritis.

"The 'cracking' is actually caused by the bursting of a bubble of nitrogen that forms inside the joint when the joint moves," says John Klippel, M.D., medical director of the Arthritis Foundation. "Popping your knuckles may be annoying to others, but it doesn't cause arthritis, enlarged joints or musculoskeletal problems."

Final verdict: False

Old wives say: You'll go deaf listening to loud music.

Pumping up the volume can damage your inner ear, says Whitaker. A study from the Institute of Laryngology and Otology at University College in London found that 62% of nightclub regulars and 72% of people who regularly attend rock concerts have experienced hearing problems, including premature hearing loss and tinnitus (ringing in the ears).

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Final verdict: True

Old wives say: Having sex can induce labor.

"There are no concrete medical studies showing that sex will bring on labor," says Meg Autry, M.D., an associate professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at the University of California at San Francisco. "That said, **orgasm** is known to cause uterine contractions, and semen contains prostaglandins, which are involved in the onset of labor and are part of medications that we use to induce labor."

Final verdict: No proof, but it may be fun to try! (Caution: Doctors recommend that certain women abstain, including those who are expecting twins, have cervical difficulties, or experience vaginal bleeding. Talk to your doctor before getting busy.)

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