

'Eight hours' sleep! And you must eat breakfast!' The truth behind 10 of the biggest health beliefs

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. In groups, discuss the questions.

1. What is the difference between a *fact* and a *belief*?
2. Look at the word cloud below. Discuss what you think the terms mean and what you think the article will be about.

fruits and vegetables
bodybuilders athletes 10,000 steps
eight hours of sleep
low-calorie diet red meat
six-pack weight loss
staying hydrated
personal trainer
muscles

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2 Key words

a. Complete the sentences with the words from the box.

based cognitively diseases factor fasting litres metabolism
moderate portions recommendation regain repetitions risk timing

1. A _____ is a fact or piece of information that influences an event.
2. A _____ is something somebody else thinks will be good for you.
3. A _____ is the possibility that something unpleasant or dangerous might happen.
4. _____ are illnesses that are caused by infections.
5. _____ is to eat no or very little food for a period of time
6. If something is _____ on something else, it refers to information to support a belief or an opinion.
7. If you describe something as _____, it means neither too great or too small in amount, size, strength, or degree.
8. _____ are how we describe the amount of food given to someone in one sitting.
9. _____ refer to doing an activity, particularly an exercise, over and over again.
10. _____ refers to the exact moment when things happen.
11. To describe an action as _____ that it is connected with recognizing and understanding things
12. To _____ something is to find or have it again after you have lost it.
13. You can measure liquids in _____.
14. Your _____ is how your body turns food and drinks into energy.

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Here are some common health beliefs and what science says now – so you can start making better health decisions this year.

- 'Lifting weights will give you big muscles'**

This isn't technically true. There are two main ways to get strong: increasing the size of individual muscles or trying to get more of them working at the same time. Bodybuilders aim to do the first, by doing many repetitions in each set of exercises, lifting until their muscles fail. Athletes, who generally have smaller shoulders than bodybuilders, aim to do the second, by lifting heavier weights for fewer repetitions.
- 'Breakfast is the most important meal of the day'**

Although there is nothing about the first meal of the day that makes it particularly special, the timing of meals is now recognised as an important factor in weight loss. One study found that those who ate a large breakfast saw greater weight loss than another group who had a smaller breakfast and larger dinner.
- 'You should walk 10,000 steps a day'**

10,000 wasn't based on any science when it was first used in the 1960s, but it might be good advice. A study released in 2022 found that walking may reduce the risk of an early death from heart disease and cancer.
- 'You need eight hours of sleep'**

Some people need eight hours sleep, while others can get by on seven. But in one of the largest ever sleep studies, started in 2017, people who reported sleeping seven to eight hours performed better cognitively than those who slept more or less than that.
- 'You should try to eat five portions of fruits and vegetables a day'**

In general, those who eat more fruits and vegetables may experience decreased levels of stress.
- 'You need to drink two litres of water a day'**

Staying hydrated is important, but the recommendation to drink two litres of water a day, while good advice, is not based on hard science. You can also stay hydrated by drinking other drinks, such as coffee, tea, milk or soft drinks.
- 'A daily glass of wine is better than not drinking'**

This belief is based on the idea that people who classify themselves as "moderate drinkers" seem to have a lower risk for some diseases. However, recent research suggests that regular, moderate drinking can still be bad for you: one study found that even one or two drinks a day might reduce the size of your brain.
- 'Certain exercises will give you a six-pack'**

"It makes a sort of sense that if you want to have a six-pack, you would do exercises like crunches and sit-ups," says Emma Storey-Gordon, a personal trainer and sports scientist. "But the truth is that whether you have a six-pack or not has far more to do with your body fat levels... than the number of sit-ups you do."
- 'Dieting will slow your metabolism'**

Many people believe that eating a low-calorie diet or fasting will cause "starvation mode", where the body slows metabolism as a way to keep you from losing any more weight. However, there may be small changes to your metabolism when you lose weight or go on a diet. This might explain why some people have a hard time keeping weight off, or even regain weight, after dieting.
- 'Red meat is bad for you'**

Red meat was often advised against because it contains a lot of fat – but it's not as simple as that. Several studies have shown a connection between eating a lot of red meat and an increased risk of certain diseases and illnesses, but it is now believed that this might be confusing, because many studies don't show the difference between processed (bacon, sausages, burgers and deli meats) and unprocessed red meat.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What are two main ways to get strong?
2. Should you have a large or a small breakfast to help with weight loss?
3. How does walking help to improve your health?
4. How many hours a day do you need to sleep to have good cognitive function?
5. What does eating fruits and vegetables help you with?
6. What else can you drink to help you to stay hydrated?
7. Is moderate drinking good for you?
8. What exercises do people think help you to get a six-pack?
9. What do people think "starvation mode" is?
10. What are some examples of processed red meat?

4 Key language

a. Find the conjunctions in the article and add them below. The article section and first letter have given to you.

Section 2: A _____

Section 5: l ____ g _____

Sections 7 and 9: H _____

b. Write your own sentences, on the topic of health and fitness, using the three conjunctions above.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss the following statements.

- "Eating healthy is more important than doing exercise".
- "An apple a day keeps the doctor away".

6 In your own words

- a. Choose one of the health beliefs featured in the article. Do some online research into the belief and whether it is true and based on scientific research or just a belief some people have.
- b. Share your research in small groups. Try to refer to studies in the same way as the author and use conjunctions when you are talking about what you researched.