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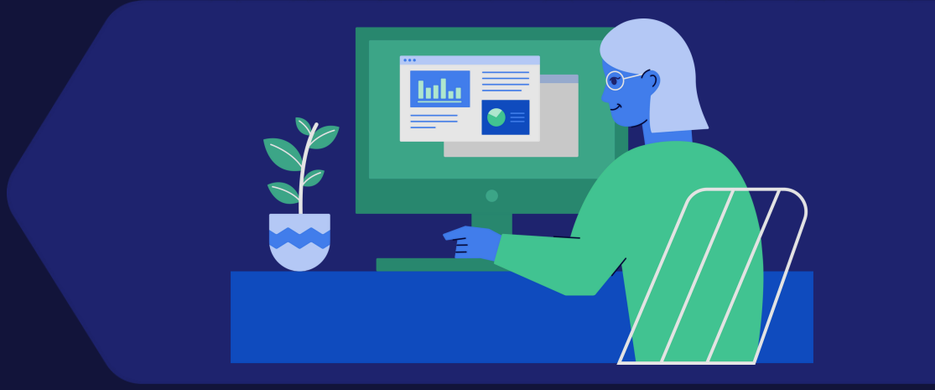
Reading Between the Headlines:

Evaluating Nutrition Science in the Media



While buzz worthy titles and captions in the news may catch our attention, they also often oversimplify or exaggerate facts. This is especially true when it comes to reports on nutrition research, which is often complex and requires context to accurately represent the results.[1-3] **This checklist of questions represents key pieces of information often missing from media reports of nutrition science, but which are important to critically evaluate and determine the credibility of conclusions or claims from these research studies.** [2,3]

Introduction

Did the study include people or animals?

Studies completed in animals are not always accurate representations of what would happen with humans.[1,4]

Who were the people in the study?

Characteristics (age, gender, race, health status, etc.) of those in the study should be similar to whoever claims are being made about.[4]

How many people were in the study?

The sample size should be large enough to be able to show consistent, reliable results (check paper for power calculation or analysis).[4]

Methods

What type of study was it?

Experimental studies (i.e. Randomized Control Trials or RCTs) introduce & measure impact of an intervention. Observational studies (i.e. prospective cohort studies) just follow participants to study existing factors.[1,3]

How long was the study?

The study should follow participants long enough to accurately measure the intended outcome, and ideally understand any long-term benefits or risks.[4]

Results

Did the study measure causation or association?

Causation, measured using RCTs, is when the intervention directly influences the outcome. Association means an outcome is more likely to occur with a specific exposure. Most nutrition research measures association since it is difficult to control lifestyle factors.[3,5]

Were results statistically AND clinically / practically significant?

Statistical significance is the probability results are not by chance. Clinical or practical significance is when results are enough to be considered important in a real-world context.[5]

How do results fit within the overall body of evidence?

Comparing results to previous studies helps determine consistency. Having only one (or a few) studies with the reported results makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions.[3-5]

References:

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