

The bottom line: There is no sure route to long life

By Patty Fisher
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In his classic film ``Sleeper," Woody Allen wakes up after 200 years to find that doctors have discovered that smoking cigarettes is actually good for you.

How far-fetched is that? I wonder.

In the past couple of weeks, a lot of sacred wisdom about health and diet has come into question. Research now shows that low-fat diets don't prevent cancer or heart disease in women over 50. Estrogen supplements may not be all bad after all. And calcium pills, long considered a prudent way to fend off osteoporosis, not only don't help, but also could increase the risk of kidney stones.

So, while inhaling carcinogenic smoke is never going to be considered healthy, one doesn't have to be asleep for 200 years to find the medical landscape has changed. It changes overnight. And that leaves the obsessed health freaks among us with two options: Throw away the supplements and stock up on Almond Joys and Haagen-Dazs, or keep the same routine and hang on until the next round of studies, which no doubt will contradict this one.

``Oh, I hope they bring back that old food pyramid," one co-worker said. ``I'd love to be able to eat bread again without feeling guilty -- and peanut butter."

Personally, I'm waiting for the cheese, crackers and chardonnay diet to come into favor.

After reading about the most recent calcium study, I reluctantly added my bottle of calcium pills to the row of discredited supplements on my bathroom shelf: Echinacea doesn't really prevent colds. Melatonin may or may not cure insomnia. Black cohosh helps reduce hot flashes, but can damage your liver.

I've stopped taking all that stuff, but I'm not throwing any of it away. Who knows when some new study will find that it works just as it's supposed to?

Like so many folks, I cling to that seductive belief -- cultivated by clever marketing people -- that long life and happiness are within my control. To ward off disease, all I have to do is eat right, exercise and stay out of the sun. Or stay in the sun, if you believe the vitamin D freaks.

But it's not that simple, of course. Everyone's susceptibility to disease is different. Even vegans get cancer. Some people are prone to high cholesterol no matter how much high-fiber cereal they eat. Others can eat KFC every day and never get fat. That's one reason the studies seem contradictory. There are lots of factors that contribute to good health and longevity. As George Burns said, ``If I'd known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself."

So, hang in there, bread lovers. Your day will come. In the meantime, I wonder what the next long-held health axiom dashed by new research will be. If we all get frozen for 200 years, what are the chances we'll wake to one of these headlines?

- **TV is good for kids:** Spending hours in front of the television actually reduces blood pressure, improves listening skills, prevents sports injuries and makes children more enthusiastic consumers, which is good for the economy.

- **Hand washing causes cancer:** Repeated washing with anti-bacterial hand soap may be responsible for an increase in skin cancer among restaurant workers.

- **Seat belts are dangerous:** New data suggests that the number of car accidents caused by people struggling to fasten their seat belts while driving is greater than the number of injuries prevented by seat belts.

- **At last, a wonder drug:** A major pharmaceutical company has developed a substance that can wake you up in the morning, put you to sleep at night, curb your appetite, calm your nerves, help you concentrate and improve your sex life. They call it nicotine. Unfortunately, there's still no safe way to administer it.