

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 10: Now You Try It #3

For the next fact-checking exercise, I'm giving you something shorter but just as challenging. Imagine this as an article someone gave you that you found really interesting. But it didn't have any links or footnotes to back up its information, and there wasn't even an author listed for the article. You would like to use the data in your blog or book but want to confirm its accuracy first. Again, please verify or correct all the facts in this piece and concentrate on the factual points, not matters of opinion.

I'll read it out loud, but I suggest for fact checking purposes that you download the PDF called Lesson 10 Exercise and go through it bit by bit with the video paused.

Is the Paleo Diet Healthy?

If you're tired of counting carbs or calories but still want to lose weight, here's an option that's been gaining traction with more and more Americans: Eat like our cave-dwelling ancestors. The Paleo Diet (so-called after the Paleolithic Age, back before dinosaurs roamed the Earth) recommends eating lean meat and fish, fruits and vegetables with next to no dairy, eggs, nuts, seeds or grains.

"Most nutritionists agree that by eliminating dairy, beans and grains from your meals, you will enjoy lower blood pressure, have fewer digestive problems and experience effortless weight loss," says Solveig Crimmens of the American Foundation for a Healthy Diet. "Even better, long-term studies of a community in Norway whose residents have adhered to the diet for 25 years show a dramatic 20 percent improvement in longevity, compared to Norwegians at large."

If you start with a smell test, this passage passes with flying colors. It is well-written, with an attributed quote to an authority who sounds legitimate. In a moment I'm going to go through the text piece by piece, so please pause the video here to do your fact check now, if you haven't already done so.

First thing to check: Does "Paleo Diet" refer to the Paleolithic Age? Yes. Putting "paleo diet paleolithic" into Google brings up a lot of pages talking about this diet in reference to prehistoric times. According to Wikipedia, the Paleolithic Age dates from around 2.6 million years ago, to around 10,000 years ago. So far so good. However, when did dinosaurs roam the Earth? Oops! Again according to Wikipedia, that took place from around 201 million years ago to around 66 million years ago. Dinosaurs predated human beings by quite a long time, not the reverse. So that's our first mistake.

Next, does our passage have it right about what's included and excluded in the Paleo diet? There are many versions of this diet, under slightly different names, such as the Caveman diet and others, but if you read about the diet on at least 3-4 different websites, you'll find agreement that it includes meat and fish, fruits and vegetables and excludes dairy and grains. However, it allows nuts, seeds and eggs. The general idea of the diet is eating things that were available to our pre-agriculture hunter/gatherer ancestors, and that includes nuts, seeds and eggs. So that's mistake number two.

Before we look at the content of the quote in the second paragraph, let's confirm the existence of Solveig Crimmens of the American Foundation for a Healthy Diet. Here we were run into big trouble! I am unable to find a single reference to Solveig Crimmens.

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Even worse, there's no reference online to the American Foundation for a Healthy Diet. You can try variations on that name, like the American Healthy Diet Foundation, and they equally turn up nothing.

However, the information within the quote is so tempting that you're not willing to give up altogether. Since Solveig is a Norwegian name and there's a reference to research in Norway, it's conceivable that this meant a Norwegian Foundation for a Healthy Diet, which doesn't show up in Google because the name would be written in Norwegian.

Unfortunately, what you'll find when you look for what nutritionists think of the Paleo diet is that it is highly controversial. Do a search using the question, "Is the Paleo diet nutritionally healthy?" These search results include a link to an article on the *US News & World Report* website, which ranked 32 diets for safety, effectiveness in weight loss, and the Paleo diet came in tied for last place. "Experts took issue with the diet on every measure. Regardless of the goal—weight loss, heart health, or finding a diet that's easy to follow—most experts concluded that it would be better for dieters to look elsewhere," said the summary. That's impossible to square with the quote we're trying to confirm, which says there's a nutritional consensus on the eating principles in the Paleo diet.

And last, what about that Norwegian study? I couldn't find it, using searches like "Norwegian study paleo diet 25 years" and with "Norway" substituted for "Norwegian." If you manage to turn it up, please let me know.

All in all, a pleasant smell at the beginning of this fact-checking session has turned into an awful stink. I wouldn't pass along *any* information from this passage.

Let's move on now to some special problems to be aware of as you're going through your fact checking routines.