

SPECIAL REPORTS

JOHN STOSSEL FOOD MYTHS

Subjects: Social Studies and Language Arts

Grade Levels: 9-12

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Synopsis

Co-anchors John Stossel and Elizabeth Vargas of ABC's *20/20* debunk several "food myths" on topics ranging from food poisoning to chewing gum to the eight-glasses-of-water-per-day requirement. In order to disprove these "myths [and] lies," and provide "straight talk" on nutrition and consumer issues, Stossel, Vargas, and other *20/20* reporters observe and interview nutritionists, coffee connoisseurs, hyperactive preschoolers, supermarket shoppers, and an advertising expert who believes that "all marketers are liars."

The video contains the segments described on page 2. You might use any or all segments as part of a science, social studies, or language arts unit focusing on nutrition, critical thinking, drawing conclusions, and distinguishing facts from opinions.



NEWS
Classroom Edition

105 Terry Drive, Suite 120, Newtown, PA 18940
(800) 295-5010

Myth #9—Eating at Home Is Safer

[Begins at start of videotape]

Via a pair of restaurant patrons, a health inspector, and a kitchen sponge full of scary microscopic cooties, viewers learn that—statistically speaking—it's safer to eat out than in.

Myth #8—Brand Name Foods Are Better

[Begins at 4:13]

As a general rule, U.S. shoppers are fiercely loyal to name brand food products. Many look down their noses—and steer their shopping carts away from—generic “store brands.” This is true even though store brands cost an average of one-third less than popular name brand products. But when *20/20* conducted supermarket taste tests, a majority of shoppers could not tell the difference between their higher-priced favorites and the store brands that they professed to scorn.

Myth #7—Carrots Help Your Eyes

[Begins at 8:13]

Experts say that although the vitamin A in carrots does benefit our eyesight, we get plenty of vitamin A from other foods. In other words, young carrot haters won't necessarily end up wearing glasses before they're twelve.

Myth #6—Green Tea Fights Cancer

[Begins at 8:30]

Pointing to comparatively few cancer cases in Asian populations, nutritionists such as Dr. Andrew Weil—and some cancer survivors—contend that the antioxidants in green tea can prevent and/or cure cancer. Some scientists disagree. While they concede that green tea does seem to prevent cancer in mice, these skeptics argue that Asia's lower cancer rate is probably due to other factors, such as a low-fat diet (e.g., sushi instead of hamburgers and fries).

Myth #5—Don't Swallow Chewing Gum

[Begins at 12:05]

Most of us grew up with the belief that swallowing a wad of chewing gum could be lethal. This was a no-no of the first magnitude, as hazardous as playing with matches, plastic bags, or rat poison. As it turns out, however, you would have to swallow many wads of gum per day before succumbing to a fatally gummed-up intestinal tract.

Myth #4—Sugar Makes Kids Hyper

[Begins at 12:24]

According to popular belief, sugary treats send children into fits of hyperactivity. That's why kids' birthday parties often turn into shrieking mobs of miniature revelers. Ice cream, cake, and candy are the culprits—aren't they? Surprisingly, research debunks this claim. In fact, rather than pumping people up, consuming large amounts of sugar is ultimately more likely to make them feel sleepy. Apparently, it's being allowed to run free in a larger-than-usual group of peers—not sugar—that supercharges young partygoers.

Myth #3—Margarine Is Healthier Than Butter

[Begins at 15:08]

In this segment, viewers learn the fine points of the butter vs. margarine controversy. An expert explains that some margarine brands contain stabilizers—dubbed “Frankenfats”—that allow the spread to solidify into butter-like sticks. Such additives are more harmful to people's health than butterfat is. However, a few soft margarine brands contain beneficial oils; healthwise, these margarines are better than butter, the expert says.

Myth #2—Expensive Coffee Tastes Better

[Begins at 18:36]

High-priced “specialty” coffees are wildly popular these days. People are willing to pay big bucks for Starbucks and other pricey brands. To find out whether coffee lovers can tell the difference between the most and least expensive brews, *20/20* conducts a nonscientific taste test. While Starbucks does come in first, two of the cheapest brands place second and fourth. Newscaster John Stossel concludes, “Coffee is a matter of individual taste. Expensive doesn't necessarily mean better.”

Myth #1—Drink Eight Glasses of Water a Day

[Begins at 23:30]

Via popular diet books and word of mouth, we've learned that we're supposed to drink “eight by eight” (eight eight-ounce glasses of water) every day. But Professor Emeritus Heinz Valtin, who devoted his scientific career to studying water in the human body, disagrees. It turns out that it's OK to consume some of our daily water requirement in the form of food (even bread is 30 percent water) and beverages such as juice and tea. Dr. Valtin says that while he consumes “five to six glasses per day, only one of them is water.” Conclusion? Drink water when you're thirsty.

Objectives

The student will:

- learn about scientific topics such as good nutrition, food poisoning, water consumption, and ways that certain foods affect people's emotions and energy levels;
- use critical thinking to detect faulty logic and distinguish between fact and opinion;
- determine whether to accept others' opinions as valid based on their credentials and the kinds of evidence they present;
- begin to understand and appreciate differences in consumer perspectives, recognizing that interpretations are influenced by individual experiences, societal values, and cultural traditions.

Background Information

John Stossel

John Stossel is a 1969 graduate of Princeton University, where he earned a BA in psychology. He started his journalism career as a researcher for a Portland, Oregon, television station. When ABC TV first hired him, Stossel became the consumer editor on *Good Morning America*. He joined ABC's newsmagazine show, *20/20*, in 1981 and rose to the role of co-anchor (with Barbara Walters) in 2003.

Stossel began hosting his own one-hour specials in 1994. On these and on his *20/20* opinion segment called "Give Me a Break," he deals skeptically with topics ranging from pop culture to politics to censorship to widely believed but unfounded fears. Stossel has received many honors for his work, including 19 Emmy Awards.



Preview Questions

Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 1: Eating at Home Is Safer

1. Do you know anyone who has suffered from food poisoning? Tell what happened.
2. Which do you think are safer to eat, home-cooked or restaurant meals? Explain why you think so.
3. What kinds of practices might cause health hazards in home and restaurant kitchens?

Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 2: Brand Name Foods Are Better

4. What are your favorite brands of cereal, orange juice, peanut butter, ketchup, and chocolate chip cookies? How long do you think your family has been buying these brands?
5. Does your family ever buy "store brands" or "generic" food brands? Why or why not?
6. Do you think there is much difference between name brands and store brands? Explain why you think so.

Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 3: Carrots Help Your Eyes

7. Some people think that eating carrots will help their eyesight. Do you think this is so? Tell how you formed your opinion.

Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 4: Green Tea Fights Cancer

8. Have you ever tasted green tea? In what parts of the world do you think this beverage is most popular?
9. Have you ever heard that green tea is a healthy drink? From whom did you obtain this information?

Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 5: Don't Swallow Chewing Gum

10. What will happen to someone who swallows chewing gum? How do you know?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 6:
*Sugar Makes Kids Hyper***

11. What happens to children—or adults—when they eat a lot of sugar (at a birthday party, for instance)?
12. The last time that you ate a lot of sugar, how did you feel?
13. Would it be wise to eat a candy bar before taking a test at school? Why or why not?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 7:
*Margarine Is Healthier Than Butter***

14. What is margarine made from? Can you explain why margarine was invented?
15. Is butter a healthy or unhealthy food? Explain your answer.
16. Which is healthier, margarine or butter? How do you know?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 8:
*Expensive Coffee Tastes Better***

17. Do some of your family members drink coffee? If so, what brand does your family buy? Do you know how much coffee costs?
18. Why do you think “coffee bars” such as Starbucks have become so popular?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing Segment 9:
*Drink Eight Glasses of Water a Day***

19. How many glasses (or bottles) of water do you drink each day? Do you think you drink enough water? Explain why you think so.
20. In order to stay healthy, how much water should a person drink each day? Where did you learn this information?

Postviewing Questions

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 1:
*Eating at Home Is Safer***

1. What evidence did *20/20* present to support its conclusion that eating out is safer than eating at home?
2. According to this segment, why are most restaurant kitchens cleaner than most home kitchens?
3. How can people ensure that they do not get food poisoning from foods prepared in their home kitchens?

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 2:
*Brand Name Foods Are Better***

4. Seth Godin, whom *20/20* interviewed for this segment, wrote a book—titled *All Marketers Are Liars*. What does this title mean?
5. Why do some shoppers choose name brands over store brands, even though store brands are usually cheaper?
6. In your opinion, did this *20/20* segment prove that store brands are equal in quality to name brands? Use examples from the video to support your opinion.
7. Did this segment change your mind about name brands that you like? (Will you be more willing to try store brands now?) Explain why or why not.

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 3:
*Carrots Help Your Eyes***

8. If you never eat carrots, will your eyesight grow worse? Explain why or why not.

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 4:
*Green Tea Fights Cancer***

9. In this segment, a *20/20* reporter interviews a cancer survivor who drinks lots of green tea. How does the woman feel about this beverage? Why do you think she feels this way?
10. Did this segment convince you that drinking green tea does not prevent or cure cancer? Explain why or why not.



**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 5:
Don't Swallow Chewing Gum**

11. Why do you think so many adults caution their children not to swallow gum? Does this segment say that it is perfectly safe to swallow gum? Explain your answer.

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 6:
Sugar Makes Kids Hyper**

12. Did this segment convince you that sugar has nothing to do with hyperactivity in children or adults? Explain why you are or are not convinced.
13. What possible explanations does the segment offer for young children's wild behavior at birthday parties?

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 7:
Margarine Is Healthier Than Butter**

14. Do you like the taste of butter better than the taste of margarine (spreads made from vegetable oil)? Explain your answer.
15. A French chef whom *20/20* interviews advises people to eat butter only in moderation. Is this advice applicable to other foods—and even to situations that have nothing to do with food? Give some examples.
16. What is “bad margarine,” according to the doctor that *20/20* interviews during this segment? What is “good margarine”?

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 8:
Expensive Coffee Tastes Better**

17. What does John Stossel conclude about the relationship between the way coffee tastes and the amount it costs? Do you agree with his conclusions? Why or why not?
18. Why do you think the Oren's Daily Roast representative agreed to take the taste test, while the Folger's Coffee representative did not? Did you believe the Folger's rep's explanation? Why or why not?

**Ask these questions after viewing Segment 9:
Drink Eight Glasses of Water a Day**

19. Why do so many people believe that it is necessary to drink eight glasses of water per day?

20. If it makes people feel better when they drink lots of water, should they continue to do so? Why or why not?
21. To show that it is not necessary to drink 64 ounces of water per day, what proof does *20/20* offer? Did this evidence convince you? Why or why not?

Suggested Activities

1. Prior to viewing *Food Myths*, distribute copies of the Response Chart at the end of this Guide. Have students fill in the chart as they watch the video. Then invite them to share and discuss their opinions, feelings, and questions about the issues that the show raises. Help students distinguish verifiable facts from opinions that the *20/20* reporters and their interviewees present. Encourage students to explain their reasons if they happen to disagree with conclusions that John Stossel, Elizabeth Vargas, and the other newscasters draw. Ask them to do library and Internet research to back up their views.
2. Read aloud the following statements from the video, one by one. Ask students to tell who makes the statement, and what the speaker means by it. (Inform them that *20/20* reporters make none of the statements that you will read.)
 - “When in doubt, throw it out!”
 - “This is a gourmet meal to a mouse.”
 - “I’d say: Keep eating out.”
 - “The truth is that what’s inside the can isn’t that different.”
 - “I would never buy generic orange juice.”
 - “The brand [of ketchup] you had when you were three is the brand you’re going to have for the rest of your life.”
 - “Green tea has this unique antioxidant...that’s not found anywhere else in nature.”
 - “The amount of green tea that’s fed to mice—it may be the equivalent of us drinking quarts and quarts of green tea per day.”
 - “You can have, like, one candy bar and be off the wall.”
 - “Even though it increases your blood sugar...it drops it down pretty quickly so that you have this kind of lull.”
 - “Frankenfats—exactly.”
 - “Margarine has been turned into medicine.”
 - “The best coffee will certainly not be the cheapest.”

3. Have students list unfamiliar and/or specialized terms that *20/20* reporters and their interviewees use in the video. Then have students use a dictionary to create “word families” based on the words they collected (see the examples below). Have students define each word and use it in a strong context sentence.

- (Eating Out Is Better Than Eating In) food poisoning: poison ivy, poisonous snake; inspector: inspect, inspection, spectator, spectacle
- (Brand Name Foods Are Better Than Store Brands) generic: gene, generate, generation, engender, geneticist
- (Can Green Tea Save Lives?) antioxidant: oxygen, oxygenate, oxygenation, antidote, antiseptic; cancer: cancerous, cancer-free, cancer survivor
- (Sugar and Hyperactivity) hyper: hyperactive, hyperactivity, inactive, activities, actively, hypersensitive, hyperconscious; sugar: sugary, sugar-free; artificial sweetener: artificiality, artifice, sweet, sweeten, sweeter
- (Margarine Is Better Than Butter) saturated fat: saturate, saturation, unsaturated, fatty, nonfat, fat-free; stabilizers: stabile, instability, stabilization, destabilize
- (Do Coffee Drinkers Get What They Pay For?) representative: represent, Congressional Representative, company rep

4. Have students collect and read current and archived newspaper and magazine articles on the topics discussed in *Four Myths*. Also encourage them to read organizations’ press releases and Web logs (blogs) that express various points of view on these issues. Then students can form groups and report on the topics in the following ways:
- a. Present factual information, trying to be as objective as possible.
 - b. Hold debates and discussions on the issues.
 - c. Create bulletin board displays that include graphic aids, pictures downloaded from the Internet, and short student essays supporting various points of view.

Activities to accompany Segment 1: Eating at Home Is Safer

5. Have students do Internet research to find out what the penalties are for health department violations in your state or local community. For instance, under what circumstances will health inspectors close down a restaurant or grocery store for good? Students can report their findings to the class in short oral presentations.
6. Encourage students to research tips on keeping home kitchens free of health hazards. They might consult federal government websites such as those sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration. Have students use their findings to compile a concise list of home kitchen do’s and don’ts. They might photocopy their completed list and bring copies home to their families.

Activities to accompany Segment 2: Brand Name Foods Are Better

7. Students can hold a debate on the following statement: Seth Godin is correct when he says that “All marketers are liars.” Have students form small “pro” and “con” teams. Team members should collect facts to support their side of the argument. For debating guidelines, you might visit the website Debate Central at <http://debate.uvm.edu/default.html>.
8. Invite students to hold blind taste tests similar to those that *20/20* conducted in supermarkets. To decide on a list of foods to taste, they might vote to determine a few name brands to which most students are strongly loyal. Then they can test those brands against store brands. Before they conduct their tests, have students predict what their results will reveal. Ask them to write a summary of their findings.



9. To investigate the gap between store brand and name brand prices, have students do the following research in a local supermarket:

- Create a sample shopping list that includes about 20 separate items,
- Determine what the list of items would cost if a shopper bought the most expensive name brands available.
- Determine what the list of items would cost if a shopper bought the least expensive name brands available.
- Determine what the list of items would cost if a shopper bought store brands only.

Have students express their findings in terms of percents.

Activities to accompany Segment 4: Green Tea Fights Cancer

10. Encourage students to use an Internet search engine's news function to find current articles on the possible link between green tea and cancer prevention. (You might use this opportunity to teach students how to distinguish between reliable and not-so-reliable Internet sources.) Have students read at least four articles on this issue, two that support one side of the controversy and two that support the other. Have them share their findings with classmates via oral reports. Also encourage them to explain their own opinions on this topic.

Activities to accompany Segment 6: Sugar Makes Kids Hyper

11. Have students keep a week-long "Sugar Journal" to monitor the amounts of sugar they consume—including added sugar, corn syrup, and fructose in food products such as breakfast cereal, yogurt, and juices. Have them note how they feel shortly after—and an hour after—consuming desserts, candy, and sweet beverages such as sodas. Students might also experiment with cutting their sugar intake and seeing whether this affects their energy level or moods. After students complete their journal, have them compare findings with classmates.
12. Have students do Internet and/or library research to determine what harmful effects—if any—sugar has on human health. They can present their findings in poster form.

Activities to accompany Segment 7: Margarine Is Healthier Than Butter

13. Have students conduct a survey based on the following questions: True or false: Any brand of margarine is better for your health than butter. True or false: Margarine that comes in sticks is more harmful to your health than butter. With their survey, have students include a short, neutral definition of margarine. Before they conduct their survey, have students predict what their results will show.
14. Have students search the Internet for recent articles on "trans fats," "bad margarine," and "Frankenfat." They can use what they learn to write a list of guidelines on choosing food products without these harmful ingredients. Then they might photocopy their list and distribute it among family members and friends.

Activity to accompany Segment 8: Expensive Coffee Tastes Better

15. Have students write a list of interview questions to ask devout coffee drinkers. Encourage students to interview a variety of people (based on traits such as age, income level, and cultural group). Before they conduct their survey, students should write a hypothesis that predicts what their research will reveal. Interview questions might include the following:
- At what age did you start drinking coffee?
 - How many cups per day do you drink?
 - Do you think the caffeine in coffee is addictive? What makes you think so?
 - What brand of coffee do you like best? What do you like about it? What makes you think that it is superior to other brands?
 - What is the most you would pay for a very good cup of coffee?
 - Why do you think businesses such as Starbucks have been so successful in recent years?

Have students write a few paragraphs to sum up their survey results

Activity to accompany Segment 9: Drink Eight Glasses of Water a Day

20. Have students conduct a survey to determine whether most people believe that to be healthy, people need to drink at least eight glasses of water per day. Tell them to write survey questions that do not reveal *20/20's* conclusion—that people can get most of the water they need from foods and beverages other than water. Before they conduct their survey, students should write a hypothesis that predicts what their research will reveal. Then they can survey grandparents, parents, schoolmates, and friends of various ages. Have students write a few paragraphs to sum up their survey results. Ask them to include graphic aid(s) in their summary.

Internet

If you have access to the Internet, here are some sources of information on issues that the *20/20* newscasters discuss on the video:

KidsHealth

<http://kidshealth.org>

This site on children's health features sections for parents, kids, and teenagers.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.hhs.gov>

HHS's website presents detailed information on healthy eating, fitness and exercise, safety, smoking, and alcohol consumption. The site provides specific sections on men's, women's, and children's health.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005

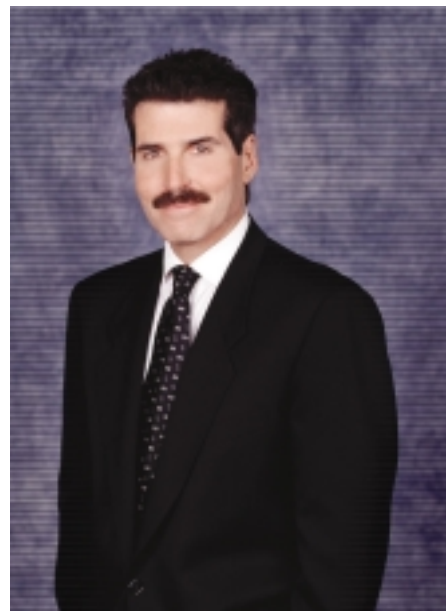
<http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines>

Downloadable publication from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Agriculture; published every five years.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Kids' Homepage

<http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/kids/default.htm>

The FDA's Kids' Homepage includes a food safety quiz and a teachers' section.



Activity #1: Response Chart

As you watch *Food Myths*, use the second column of the chart to record your reactions to the information that the *20/20* newscasters report as well as the opinions and conclusions that they and others express. Also jot down any questions that come into your mind as you view the show.

<i>"Food Myth"</i>	<i>Your Own Opinions and Questions</i>
#9 Eating at Home Is Safer	
#8 Brand Name Foods Are Better	
#7 Carrots Help Your Eyes	
#6 Green Tea Fights Cancer	
#5 Don't Swallow Chewing Gum	
#4 Sugar Makes Kids Hyper	
#3 Margarine Is Healthier Than Butter	
#2 Expensive Coffee Tastes Better	
#1 Drink Eight Glasses of Water a Day	