Ask for Evidence... aphrodisiacs

We hear all kinds of claims about what is good for our health, bad for the environment, how to avoid cancer, how to improve education, cut crime, cure disease or improve food. Some are based on reliable evidence and scientific rigour. Many are not. How can we tell the difference?

VoYS USA has launched an ‘Ask for Evidence’ campaign to encourage people to question the claims they see in newspapers, on TV, in adverts and from policy makers. It launches on Valentine’s Day, so here, a group of early career researchers have a quick look at the evidence behind aphrodisiac claims.

Are Oysters the perfect Valentines appetizer?

Andy Greenspon, a young scientist at Harvard University says: “While oysters do have a high zinc and D-aspartic acid content, both of which are linked to testosterone production, you would be better off simply eating a well-balanced diet and exercising regularly. One study showed ingesting D-Asp increased testosterone levels after 6 to 12 days of consistent use. But after ceasing use testosterone levels quickly started returning to baseline levels. Historically, the aphrodisiac claim of oysters has more to do with their resemblance to female sex organs, showing the power of imagination alone to spark sexual energy.”

Verdict: Unless you want to eat a large daily dose of oysters for the rest of your life, it might be better to just look at them for inspiration...

According to Dr. Justin Lehmiller, social psychologist and author of The Psychology of Human Sexuality: “Oysters have been touted as a food that can put you in the mood for years. However, there is no scientific evidence that shellfish, or any other food for that matter, can boost sexual arousal or performance. Although there are some people who swear otherwise, the reality is that when these foods ‘work,’ it is probably just a result of the placebo effect. In other words, if you strongly believe that what you’re eating will turn you on, then you will likely become aroused. So in the end, you’re probably just as likely to wind up in bed no matter what you order for dinner.”

Is Symmetry more attractive?

Raji Edayathamangalam, biomedical scientist at Harvard Medical School says: “There have been studies showing that symmetry is a marker for genetic fitness and that women are more attracted to symmetrical faces. But one study showed that women could still judge attractiveness when they were shown only one half of male faces, suggesting that there's more to attractiveness than just symmetry.”

Verdict: Symmetry is perhaps only one side of the story...

Will your Chocolate dessert be the aphrodisiac that makes this Valentine’s Day super sweet?

Maria Carlota Dao, a young scientist at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy says: “Very few studies have measured chocolate's power as an aphrodisiac. One study showed that women who consumed chocolate every day reported having higher sexual function than women who did not. However, when age was taken into account the difference went away.”

Verdict: Correlation doesn't necessarily mean causation; there are likely other reasons why high libido is linked to chocolate consumption.
Is Ginseng the new (or old!) Viagra?

Andy Greenspon says: "Sexual function can be quite subjective and is extremely psychological. Human beings can be turned "on" and "off" by so many different stimuli that any quick chemical fixes seem like a pipe dream. More important than any drugs might be the power of positive thinking. A research study involving ginseng showed that participants receiving placebo pills showed a similar amount of improvement in sexual function compared to those who received ginseng pills. Thus, confidence in your sexuality may be all that is needed."

Verdict: "Taking ginseng to improve sexual function may work – but only as a placebo. Positive thinking may be the actual and more natural “drug” at work here."

Should women be reaching for the Blond Hair dye on February 14?

We’ve all heard that gentlemen prefer blonds, but maybe we haven’t seen the evidence. One study I found showed that UK researchers found a female confederate was approached significantly more frequently when her hair was dyed blond. But in the low lighting of a nightclub this may have been because she was easier to see!

Verdict: Going blond might make you more visible in the dark, but doesn’t guarantee you’ll have more fun this Valentine’s Day.

Does Rhinoceros Horn really work as an aphrodisiac?

Traditionally, it was the suggestive shape of the rhino horn that led to its use as an aphrodisiac, not its chemical properties, and there is no evidence to suggest it has any chemical effect on sexual activity. I found that in recent times the use of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac has declined – but can’t tell if that’s because of decreasing availability or if people have been taking the evidence into account.

Verdict: No evidence! And think of the rhinoceros.

Can Horny Goat Weed really boost erectile function?

Andy Greenspon says: "Though the flowering plant Horny Goat Weed (Epimedium) is often claimed to restore "sexual fire", no human studies have been done to determine how effective it is at improving sexual function or acting as an aphrodisiac. Epimedium have been shown to promote erection – but only in rats and rabbits; no research studies have been done on humans. Furthermore, while improving erectile function is a component of sexual satisfaction, there is no evidence that Epimedium improves other aspects of sexual desire or pleasure."

Verdict: “While a compound in Horny Goat Weed could possibly behave as Viagra, the research so far has been done only on rats and rabbits.”

Is Watermelon an alternative to Viagra?

Watermelon contains high levels of the amino acid citrulline, which has a similar effect to Viagra, but most of this amino acid is actually in the watermelon’s rind. So unless you’re willing to test your teeth and crunch through that, this Valentine’s claim doesn’t stand the test.

Verdict: Any Viagra-like effect would come with some indigestion. Not so sexy!