

The Grocer

Taking health advice with a pinch of salt

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I remember the first time I saw the movie, *Jaws*, when I was a nipper. I had never thought twice about swimming – or, in my case, doggie paddling – in the sea. The ocean was safe, a wonderful place where I thought I could come to no harm. Since that film I've been terrified of being shark-bait.

It's pretty much like that with food. Mum dosed me up with Gouda, Dairy Lea and Laughing Cow. Lots of dairy – with implications of strong teeth and bones – was seen as a good thing. I also remember lamb that dripped with fat, regular red-meat offerings on the dinner table on Sunday, and kebabs from the corner for a treat.

Then in 1983, we Brits were given the bombshell and advised fat consumption should be strictly limited – otherwise we risked cardiac disease and an early reunion with our maker. Call me sensitive but I've been a food faddist ever since, and I'm now an olive oil and Quorn man. Imagine my surprise when I picked up the *Daily Mail* this morning and read: "Butter ISN'T bad for you after all: Major study says 80s advice on dairy fats was flawed".

After all my efforts? Surely not. So I read the original report in the journal *Open Heart*, on which the article was based, and it became clear that *Mail* headline was perhaps rather misleading. The advice issued in the 1980s wasn't necessarily flawed, just premature based on available evidence at the time.

It's an important difference, but one that easily gets lost amid the roar of tabloid coverage. For consumers, the result is a cacophony of conflicting advice. One study tells them dark chocolate and red wine are good for the heart (in moderation, of course); another says they rot your teeth.

Let's hope many will take these types of reports with a pinch of salt. There are too many studies that quickly gain credence but remain open to interpretation and challenge. The salfat issue is a key point in case.

Instead of vilifying one particular nutrient (whether it's fat one day, or sugar the next), moderation on all fronts seems to be a much more sensible approach.

That's why I was taken by The Dairy Council's response to today's reporting on the fat debate.

The body's director of nutrition, Anne Mullen, said: "An excess in consumption of saturated fat contained in any foods would not be a good, balanced diet but the reality is that anyone putting butter on their toast in the morning or drinking full-fat milk – unless they have a particular medical condition – can do so in the knowledge that these are nutritionally sound products. The overarching issue in terms of saturated fat is the amount rather than the existence of it in a particular product."

As my old granny used to say: "A little bit of what you fancy, does you good." And I'm still standing...for now.