

Nutrition Studies Under More Scrutiny

A new analysis suggests that nutrition researchers sometimes overstate their findings.

By Jef Akst | November 4, 2013

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About one in every 11 papers published about nutrition and obesity has “some kind of issue that we identified that was degrading the fidelity of research reporting,” the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s (UAB) Nir Menachemi, who led a new analysis of nutrition studies found in leading medical and public health journals, told [Reuters Health](#). “In the article we call it an overreaching statement,” he added. “That’s probably the most fair way to characterize these infractions.” Moreover, observational research is often used to make untested nutrition recommendations, Menachemi and his colleagues found.

Looking at 377 nutrition and obesity papers published in 2001 and another 560 from 2011, the researchers found that nearly 9 percent overstated the findings in the abstract—describing correlational data as evidence of causation, for example, or overgeneralizing the study’s relevance. The 2011 studies contained more “overreaching” statements than did the 2001 papers.

The team’s findings, published in the November issue of [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#), closely follow another critical study of the field. Just last month (October 9) Edward Archer of the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina and colleagues published a [PLOS ONE](#) article on this topic “demonstrating that about 40 years and many millions of dollars of US nutritional surveillance data were fatally flawed,” as Archer wrote in an [opinion](#) at www.the-scientist.com. Specifically, his team discredited the caloric intake data collected through the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) over the past four decades. “In most research domains, such a finding might be monumental,” Archer wrote; “yet in nutrition epidemiology . . . these results are commonplace.”

“Nutrition science is fraught with research issues that corrupt both the validity of the results as well as the fidelity of the scientific reporting,” Archer wrote in an email to *The Scientist* regarding the new findings. “The team at UAB has performed a great service to the field by highlighting the ‘overreaching’ and editorializing that has become ubiquitous in many nutrition journals. Hopefully, their efforts will help restore the epistemic humility that the field of nutrition so desperately needs if it is to overcome the inertia of an unproductive status quo.”