

# HEALTHY...OR HYPED?

**When health benefits are touted for a specific food, check who's making the claims. The food industry finances a lot of research, some of it biased.**

Avocado is having a moment. Once avoided by health-conscious eaters because of its high fat content, the creamy superfruit is now being whipped into smoothies, spread on toast, and churned into ice cream.

Fueling the trend are studies that highlight avocados' high levels of beneficial mono- and polyunsaturated fats and potassium, as well as links to improvements in heart health, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and even—despite the high calorie count—weight loss. The source of funding for much of this research? The Hass Avocado Board, a California-based collective of importers and growers whose mission is to promote the fruit.

For decades, food industry organizations have supplied substantial amounts of cash to fund research. For instance, juice maker Pom Wonderful has reportedly

spent \$35 million on pomegranate research, sparking countless news articles and advertisements hailing the fruit's high antioxidant content. (In 2010, the Federal Trade Commission issued a formal complaint against the company, saying many of its health claims were overblown.) Last year, Ocean Spray said it would commit \$10 million to exploring cranberries' antimicrobial properties.

The food industry's deep pockets can be helpful for getting research conducted that otherwise wouldn't be done—as long as the scientists carrying out the studies operate responsibly, says registered dietitian Susan Levin, director of nutrition education at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine: “If the researchers themselves can stay unbiased, there's always a benefit to having more information about something.”

But beware of bias. When Marion Nestle, professor emerita of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University, reviewed 168 industry-funded nutrition studies conducted between March 2015 and March 2016, she found that 156 of them drew conclusions favorable to their sponsors.

“There may be a rare case where a company is motivated by improving the public's health,” says Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. “But overall, the purpose of this research is marketing.”

Consumers can do their part in weeding out the good science from the potentially bad. “Any time a nutrition study comes out with an incredible and implausible result,” says Nestle, “the first question should be, ‘Who paid for it?’ If it's a company with a vested interest, be skeptical.”