4 Tips to Spot Bad Science Reporting

(slow playful music)

Tired of not knowing what to believe when it comes to science and health?

(upbeat techno music)

Seems like everyday I hear a new crazy science claim.

(upbeat techno music)

Really Cosmo? Yellow foods are the secret to happiness? These headlines may provide a good laugh, and even help me justify my mac n’ cheese obsession, but bad reporting is a problem. I mean, how can we make solid decisions about our health and environment like how to vote, what to buy, or what can make us sick, if we don’t understand the science?

So with all this crazy info out there, how are you supposed to know which science news is legit and what’s BS? Don’t worry, we got you! We read a bunch of stuff and talked to experts to bring you our top four tips to help you spot bad science news, and we’ve even come up with this nifty little acronym to help you remember. GLAD, G-L-A-D. G, get past the clickbait. L, look for crazy claims. A, analyze sources, and D, determine opinions of outside experts. Just sit back, relax, and be GLAD.

Alright, so number one, get past the clickbait. Headlines will often oversimplify, or over exaggerate a claim, to get a reader’s attention. Like this one, bloodsucking parasitic hookworms could help make millions of people healthier. I read that headline and I’m like, cool, bring on the parasites. But when you actually read the article, you find out that they’re talking about a protein produced by hookworms. Not exactly the same thing.

Next, ask yourself, is this making a crazy claim? If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. The words cure, breakthrough, miracle, and this study proves are signs that a story might be overhyping the science. Look, we all want a quick fix, but the truth is science is kinda slow. One study alone is not enough to make broad, sweeping claims. You need a lot of studies to back up your conclusions.

Next, analyze your sources. What research is the story based on? Science news stories based on research published in a peer-reviewed science journal are more legit than say, a story coming from the organization or a person trying to sell you stuff. Like, am I supposed to be surprised that a doctor that sells supplements is also telling me that they’ll save my life? Hey guys, if you watch Above the Noise three times a day, you’ll lose 10 pounds (ding) guaranteed in a week. In case you’re wondering what a peer-reviewed journal is, this is how it works. Let’s say you’re a scientist and you just finished a study. Now you wanna get that study out there, so you’d submit it to a journal, and then they’d send it out to a group of other scientists to evaluate. If they think it’s legit, it gets the green light, and it gets published. Major peer-reviewed journals include Science, Nature, and the Journal of the American Medical Association. Just keep an eye out for sketchy science journals that don’t have the same standards. There’s a list of those in the description below.
And last, but not least, the D in our GLAD. Determine outside expert opinions. Does this news story ask outside experts to comment on the research? Good reporting usually involves talking not only to the scientists that conducted the study, but also other researchers that weren't involved. These folks can comment on how the study relates to a larger body of evidence. Just make sure that scientist actually knows what they're talking about. Like having a PhD in astrophysics doesn't necessarily qualify you to talk about marine biology.

So there you have it, just follow our tips the next time you come across a science story and you'll be GLAD you did. See what I did there? So now we wanna hear from you. Have you come across a science news story you're not sure about, and want us to investigate? Share them in the comments below and we'll chat about them next week. And if you like this video, there's another host named Shirin. She's awesome. You should watch her video on Can Social Status Make You Sick? Spoiler Alert: It does. Or does it? I mean, it's kinda complicated, but I guess you gotta watch to find out.