

# The Nutrition Reporter™

EXTRA

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The independent newsletter that reports vitamin, mineral, and food therapies

## Reviews of Recent Health Books

It's summertime...and the time that many people try to catch up on their reading. With that thought in mind, we've reviewed recently published consumer-oriented and scientific books on health and nutrition.

### CONSUMER BOOKS

***Our Daily Meds***, by Melody Petersen (Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2008). \$26. Several good books in recent years have investigated the marketing and sales "feeding frenzy" of pharmaceutical companies. Petersen's *Our Daily Meds* may very well be the best of these books, and it comes at a good time: a recent study found that more than half of Americans now take at least one prescription drug on a regular basis. The book's subtitle is a well crafted summary: *How the Pharmaceutical Companies Transformed Themselves into Slick Marketing Machines and Hooked the Nation on Prescription Drugs*.

A former investigative reporter for the *New York Times*, Petersen covers what has largely been a rigging of drug company-supported research in favor of drugs. The now well-known dangers of Premarin, Vioxx, and many other drugs are testimony to the deceit of the drug companies. She covers how many physicians have been compromised in their practice by company-supported conferences, research dollars, and the ever-present sales representatives. In politics, such corruption would be a felony, but apparently not in the modern management of disease care. Petersen's book also addresses how the drug companies have convinced Americans (and increasingly, people in other nations) that they "need" drugs for conditions big and small, from controlling overactive bladder (which could actually be a symptom of diabetes) to lowering cholesterol levels (a symptom of coronary heart disease, but a debatable cause).

***In Defense of Food***, by Michael Pollan (Penguin, 2008). \$21.95. Pollan, a journalism professor, has written one of the best books I've ever read on nutrition. In many respects, *In Defense of Foods*

looks at the nutritional forest, not the individual trees, and in the process, Pollan reminds us of the importance of eating whole, unprocessed foods in terms of nutrition and the joy of life itself. Pollan rails against the science of "nutritionism," the scientific reductionist approach to studying and often recommending individual nutrients. His basic recommendations are incredibly elegant: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." He adds, as another rule of thumb, to avoid eating anything your great-grandmother would not have eaten. That bit of advice rules out virtually all junk foods, which he refers to as food-like objects.

Pollan's book is almost a poetry of nutrition, and much of the enjoyment of it comes in his writing style, simplicity, and clarity of thought. He recommends eating whole and natural foods and, overall, his dietary recommendations are fairly consistent with my own. (I recommend a Paleo-type diet, which is a bit older than anyone's great-grandmother; and I suggest grains as only an occasional treatment, not a staple.)

I have only two criticisms of Pollan's book. First, he does not seem to appreciate the preventive and therapeutic benefits of nutritional supplements, one of the real benefits and applications of nutritionism. Second, he does not seem to recognize that some people, such as those who are obese or those who have prediabetes or diabetes, have been so poisoned by junk foods that they do best on a diet rich in quality protein and vegetables and no grains. (For most people, the vegetables will provide sufficient carbohydrates for energy.) Having said that, I do realize that the therapeutic use of diets and supplements was not part of his vision for *In Defense of Food*. Again, I highly recommend this book.

***Ending the Food Fight***, by David Ludwig, MD, PhD (Houghton Mifflin, 2007). \$26. I'm a big fan of Dr. Ludwig – he's a Harvard physician and researcher, and he's much more outspoken than his

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better known milquetoast colleagues. Ludwig is a pediatrician who understands the dietary causes of overweight and diabetes. Because he treats children – innocent victims of disease-promoting junk foods – he reveals a justifiable sense of moral outrage. Dr. Ludwig makes his dietary and lifestyle recommendations a family affair – after all, one cannot expect a child to adopt healthier eating habits without his parents and siblings also doing so. He capitalizes on children’s natural curiosity about the inner workings of their bodies and foods to encourage them to improve their eating habits, an approach that has worked well in his pediatric practice. I could quibble about some of Ludwig’s recommendations (for grains and legumes), but I realize that he is trying to teach children and their families to make healthier food choices. Dietary refinements can come later.

**SCIENTIFIC BOOKS**

*Harper’s Illustrated Biochemistry, 27th Edition*, by Robert K. Murray, MD, PhD, et al. (Lange Medical Books/McGraw Hill, 2006) \$47.95. A physician friend kept asking me about good biochemistry books, and I realized that I needed one as a reference in my office library. But in looking over various biochemistry textbooks, I found that nearly all of them failed to make clear links between nutrition and biochemistry – odd because nutrients provide the chemical foundation of everything found in our bodies, including our genes.

*Harper’s* is not a new book, but one that builds on its long history as a textbook. Although I still wish for a good nutritional biochemistry book, *Harper’s Illustrated Biochemistry* is definitely a step in the right direction. Right in the beginning of the book, the authors point out that nutrition and biochemistry are essentially the same subject viewed from two slightly different perspectives, and that the knowledge of both subjects is essential for preventive medicine. The book is relatively easy to navigate and read, and even the technical passages provide a conceptual understanding of more detailed biochemical processes. For people well-versed in nutrition, this book is really the next step in learning, and the authors frequently link biochemical processes to their underlying nutrients.

*The Vitamins: Fundamental Aspects in Nutrition and Health, 3rd Edition*, by Gerald F. Combs, Jr, PhD (Elsevier, 2008). \$74.95. If you, like me, devour information of nutrition and are also scientifically oriented, this book is a worthwhile addition to your library. *The Vitamins* is a textbook covering the history of vitamins and the basic chemical and

physiological properties of all of the vitamins and, as such, provides a solid foundation for further studies. The book contains a wealth of information on vitamins that does not usually appear in magazine articles or research papers – such as that vitamin D activity may be impaired by low levels of zinc or iron (p163).

Although the book does not concentrate on the therapeutic roles of vitamins, it does include some important observations. For example, the author points out that marginal vitamin deficiencies lead first to the depletion of vitamin reserves, and then to cellular changes in metabolism – setting the stage for morphological changes and clinical symptoms, which could take months or years to appear (p76).

*Vitamin K*, edited by Gerald Litwack, PhD (Elsevier, 2008). \$149.95. Long viewed simply as the “coagulation vitamin,” vitamin K has emerged in recent years as a powerful determinant of health. It is needed for the synthesis of bone proteins and therefore the prevention of osteoporosis. It also plays important roles in cancer prevention and treatment. Vitamin K is part of the vitamin and hormone series of books published by Elsevier. This is a solid scientific book, one appropriate for researchers and biochemistry-oriented physicians.

**AND FINALLY...BOOKS BY JACK CHALLEM**

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The Nutrition Reporter™  
Post Office Box 30246 • Tucson AZ 85751-0246 USA  
Editor and Publisher: Jack ChalleM  
Copy Editor: Mary E. Larsen

**Medical and Scientific Advisors**

Richard P. Huemer, MD Lancaster, Calif. • Ralph K. Campbell, MD Polson, Montana  
Peter Langsjoen, MD Tyler, Texas • Ronald E. Hunninghake, MD Wichita, Kansas  
Marcus Laux, ND San Francisco, Calif. • James A. Duke, PhD Fulton, Maryland