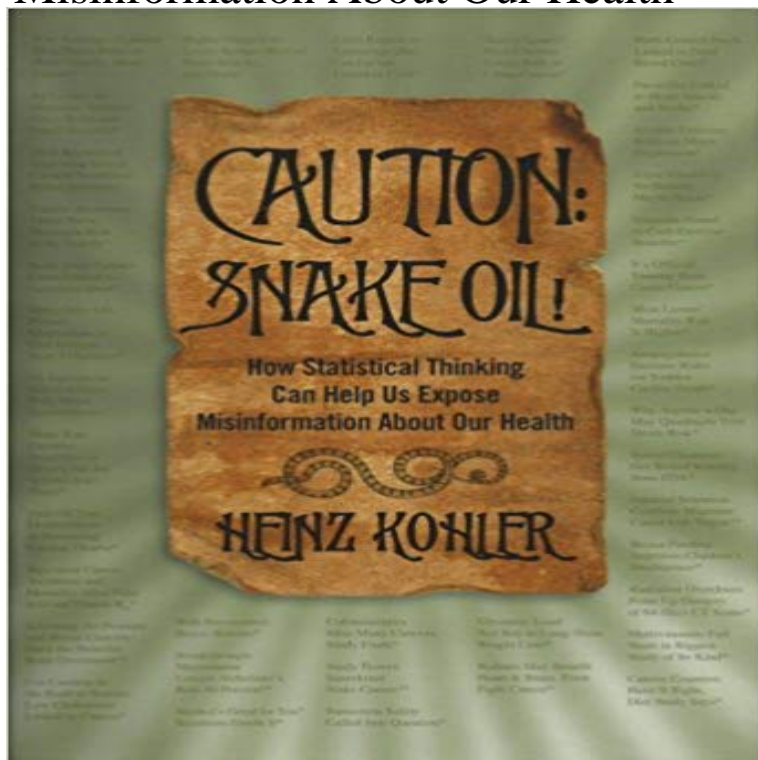


Caution: Snake Oil!: How Statistical Thinking Can Help Us Expose Misinformation About Our Health



The headlines keep coming. Every day, we meet new health-related stories about prescription and over-the-counter drugs, medical devices and procedures, the lifestyle we should adopt, foods we should favor, and dietary supplements that would surely add years to our lives. Rightly, we dismiss much of this as pure snake oil. Mayonnaise prevents Alzheimers? Chelation therapy blasts away arterial plaque? Food coloring lowers bad cholesterol? Cinnamon clobbers diabetes? Grapefruit erases breast cancer? Watermelon slashes prostate cancer? Come on! But what about more serious-sounding claims? True enough, reports about ACE inhibitors and beta blockers, Advil and Motrin, 64-slice CT scans and PSA tests, drug-coated stents and the DASH diet appear to be far removed from snake oil, but false claims about any of these, this book asserts, are snake oil no less than absurd and fantastic claims about mayonnaise and Alzheimers. Consider how glowing press releases of one time, even by renowned medical journals or the FDA, are often followed by conflicting stories at a later time, which makes us ask: Will fancy cholesterol drugs save us from heart attacks or will they destroy our liver? Is the once-a-day baby aspirin the cure of the century or a stroke-causing hoax? Will Avandia fight our diabetes or give us a heart attack? This book offers a remedy: if we care to separate bogus claims from the real thing, we must adopt the special way of statistical thinking that is routinely employed by the best of those who undertake the scientific studies that alone can generate medical knowledge we can trust. Readers are taught to ask a series of tough statistical questions whenever they encounter a new health-related claim and unless all of the answers are satisfactory, are urged to dismiss that claim no matter what the headlines. A medical claim based on questionable statistical procedures, this

book concludes, is nothing else but a snake oil claim.

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