Eating french fries is as unhealthy as smoking 25 cigarettes? Pseudoscience on health and food abounds

I had never heard of psychiatrist Dr. Paul Saladino, which is somewhat surprising because he is quite frisky in the duck pond. His TikTok videos in which he tries to convince his legions of followers that dietary fibre is unnecessary, that drinking beer leads to “man boobs,” that LDL cholesterol does not increase the risk of heart disease, that oatmeal is toxic and the key to health is eating red meat, are laughable.

Saladino’s pseudoscientific rants were brought to my attention by a former student who now teaches science in Germany. He was asked by one of his students about a video in which Saladino claims that eating a serving of McDonald’s fries is equivalent to smoking a pack of 25 cigarettes.

The stimulus for this video seems to be a paper that Saladino read but was unable to properly digest. It discussed similarities between the chemical content of french fries and tobacco smoke and noted that a serving of fries can contain some carcinogenic aldehydes in amounts comparable with that found in the smoke from 25 cigarettes. In no way did the authors suggest that the risks were comparable.

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One way or another, we are in contact with thousands of chemicals on a regular basis, and teasing out individual effects is not possible. While french fries may indeed contain some carcinogens, it does not automatically follow that eating them causes cancer. As a classic analogy, coffee contains carcinogens such as furfural, caffeic acid and styrene, but we know that coffee doesn’t cause cancer.

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