



June 20, 2011 – Grand Rapids, MI

Percentages IRL

Saturday's message focused on the percentage difference of nutrients in organic foods, and Paula helped illustrate the point so well with the example of money and percentages. Today I want to talk about percentages IRL and your health. No, not the Indy Racing League or Internet Resource Locator—I'm talking about the Facebook and chat-room acronym: in real life.

Percentages are important only if they result in meaningful differences. This is especially true when it comes to health. In order to make their research sound important, many scientists will talk in terms of percentage differences between variables; they will also state that the differences were statistically significant. In the world of science, that's important. In real life, it may be or it may not. Without knowing the hard numbers, we don't know whether the difference really matters IRL.

In Saturday's message, the illustration showed that what sounds like a big difference, percentage-wise, may not mean something if the numbers you begin with are small. On the other hand, a small percentage change can make an enormous difference if the base numbers are large. For example, the U.S. unemployment rate went down half a percentage point in May—that means tens of thousands of people found jobs, and tens of thousands of families can breathe a little easier. Only half a percentage point, but that's meaningful IRL.

So here's a rule that you can use whenever you see headlines that talk in terms of percentages: if they don't give hard numbers that illustrate the actual differences, take the information with a degree of skepticism whether it's statistically significant or not. If the numbers make a difference in real life, they'll be reported.

I always illustrate the concept with this comment: have you ever heard of a preacher who was so heavenly-minded he was of no earthly good? That's the same thing. You know I love science, but if research isn't meaningful IRL, it won't help us get healthy or fit.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

WGVU FM 88.5/95.3 **npr** ***Straight Talk on Health***

Hear Dr. Chet's take on the latest health news and research—listen to *Straight Talk on Health* at 7 p.m. Sunday in the Eastern Time Zone on WGVU-FM 88.5 or 95.3, or listen live via the Internet by going to www.wgvu.org and clicking on "Listen Live" in the gray bar at the top.

The health information in this message is designed for educational purposes only. It's not a substitute for medical advice from your healthcare provider, and you should not use it to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease. It's designed to motivate you to work toward better health, and that includes seeing your healthcare professional regularly. If what you've read raises any questions or concerns about health problems or possible diseases, talk to your healthcare provider today.

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