

What is an Urban Legend?

- Universal motifs in folklore, or stories too good to be true. Urban legends are friend-of-a-friend stories (FOAFs) that are told to describe strange, but supposedly real events, when in fact they are fictional due to word of mouth invention or distortion. There is usually a true element to the legend, but it becomes fictional as it is passed from one person to the next. Core elements in most urban legends remain the same, but details of the story can differ from one locale to the next.
www.csgr.us/terminology.html
- Urban legends are a kind of folklore consisting of stories often thought to be factual by those circulating them. Urban legends are sometimes repeated in news stories and, in recent years, distributed by email. People frequently say such tales happened to a “friend of a friend” – so often, in fact, that FOAF has become a commonly used acronym to describe this sort of story. Urban legends are not necessarily untrue, but they are often false, distorted, exaggerated, or sensationalized.
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_Legends

Urban Legend Quiz – Taken from Mythbusters <http://dsc.discovery.com/fansites/mythbusters/quiz/quiz.html>

It's hotter in the summertime because the Earth is closer to the sun.

FICTION - The Earth is actually closer to the sun in January, and farthest from the sun in July. It's not the distance from the sun that causes the change in seasons, but our position relative to the sun. The Earth is tilted at a 23.5-degree angle to its orbit around the sun. In the summer, even though it's slightly further from the sun, the northern hemisphere is tilted so the sun's rays hit it more directly than they do in the wintertime, which is what makes it hotter. Because the days are longer in the summertime, the sun also has more time to heat up the Earth. The Earth's tilt is also why the seasons are reversed in the southern hemisphere.

If you cut a worm in half, each half will grow back into a complete worm.

FICTION - If you cut a worm in half, you will most likely end up with two halves of a dead worm. However, some species of worms can re-grow a new tail if it is cut off (or more likely, eaten by a bird). While it is possible that the head half of the worm may grow a new tail, the tail half will not grow a new head -- so you're unlikely to end up with more worms than you started with.

If you go swimming less than an hour after eating, you will get stomach cramps and drown.

FICTION - Not once has a drowning death been attributed to "swimming with a full stomach." Yes, swimmers can develop cramps in the water, but few are the result of eating right before swimming. And unless you can't swim (in which case you should wait until you've had lessons before hitting the water), no cramp would be serious enough to prevent you from swimming to safety.

You are more likely to be struck by lightning than attacked by a shark.

FACT - According to the National Weather Service, the odds of being struck by lightning in the United States in any given year are 1 in 700,000. By contrast the odds of being attacked by a shark in the United States are roughly 1 in 8 million.

So don't be afraid to go in the water -- just be sure to get out and seek shelter at the first sign of a thunderstorm, because you'll be a sitting duck in the water or on the beach.

If you stare at the sun, even during an eclipse, you could go blind.

FACT - Direct sunlight can damage the retina -- light-sensitive nerve endings in the back of the eye -- causing impaired vision or blindness. You should never look directly at the sun. Dark sunglasses or even a welder's helmet will not protect your eyes, not even during an eclipse.

Eating bananas will attract mosquitoes, while eating garlic will repel them.

FICTION - Modifying your diet will not protect you against mosquito bites. Nor will rubbing yourself with fabric softener sheets -- another common home remedy. The only proven way to prevent mosquito bites is to keep your skin covered and wear an insect repellent containing DEET.

If you are stung by a jellyfish while swimming in the ocean, you should have someone urinate on the sting.

FICTION - If you are ever unfortunate enough to get stung by a jellyfish, you'll have some small consolation in knowing that there is no need to add insult to injury by asking someone to pee on you. Experts recommend carefully scraping off any tentacles that have adhered to the skin and treating the sting with vinegar, baking soda, ice packs, salt water, hot water or even meat tenderizer -- but definitely NOT urine.

An ant can lift more than 10 times its own weight, so if it were as big as a human, it could lift over 2,000 pounds.

FICTION - While it is true that an ant can lift an object that weighs many times more than itself, the same would not apply to a human-sized ant. It's all a matter of scale and anatomy. An increase in body size does not correlate to an equivalent increase in muscle mass. In fact, if an ant were the size of a grown man, its legs probably wouldn't even be able to support its own weight. Conversely, if we were as small as an ant, we could probably lift more than 150 times our own weight and put those wimpy ants to shame.

Spider silk is as strong as the Kevlar used in bulletproof vests.

FACT - Spider silk has long fascinated scientists with its remarkable strength and elasticity. It is stronger than steel and can stretch up to 50 percent of its original length. A strand of spider silk the width of a pencil could stop a Boeing 747 airplane in flight. Researchers have attempted to synthesize spider silk in the lab for a variety of military, medical, and aerospace applications, including bulletproof vests, parachutes, artificial tendons and ligaments, and tethers.

You can get sunburned through a window.

FACT - While most car windshields and newer windows in homes are treated to filter out the sun's UV rays, they can't block them entirely, so it's still possible to get burned through a window. Just because you are inside your home or car, don't think you're safe from sunburn.

Honeybees communicate with one another by dancing.

FACT - Bees can describe the distance, direction, quality and quantity of a food source with a complex waggle dance that they perform when they return to the hive. A circular dance indicates that the food is within about 35 yards, while a figure-8 pattern indicates that it is farther away.

If you see a fin sticking out of the water, a shark attack is imminent.

FICTION - It depends on the fin. If it is curved and moving up and down, it's a dolphin, not a shark. A shark's fin is straighter, and moves from side to side as it swims. You can often also see the vertical fin on the shark's tail right behind it. Still, it's better to get out of the water than stick around to examine the fin and its movement closely.

The combined weight of all the world's ants is equal to that of all the humans on earth.

FACT - What ants lack in size, they more than make up for in sheer numbers. According to renowned entomologist E.O. Wilson, there are an estimated 10,000,000,000,000 ants on earth, and their combined weight is equivalent to the entire human population. That's roughly 1.6 million ants for each person.

Tourists have returned rocks taken from Hawaiian beaches in hopes of reversing a curse for Pele, the goddess of fire who don't like people taking her rocks.

FACT - Legend has it that anyone removing volcanic rock or sand from Hawaiian beaches will incur the wrath of Pele, goddess of volcanoes. While this "curse" may have been invented by rangers at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (HVNP) to prevent tourists from making off with bits of the park, enough people have suffered as a result that they felt compelled to bring or send their "souvenirs" back to Hawaii.

HVNP and countless hotels receive a steady stream of packages containing rocks, sand and shells, along with notes asking to return them to the beach so the sender can reverse their sudden string of seriously bad luck. There are even businesses you can mail your purloined items to so they can return them to the beach for you.

Daddy longlegs are the most venomous of all spiders, but are unable to puncture human skin.

FICTION - First of all, what exactly is a "daddy longlegs" spider? There are several different critters that have been branded with this nickname -- most commonly the harvestman, the crane fly and the pholcid house spider. Harvestmen and crane flies are not spiders, nor do they have any venom. Like all spiders, pholcid house spiders are venomous, but there is no scientific evidence that their venom is particularly potent. It is true that they are unable to puncture human skin with their fangs, but even if they could, it is doubtful they would cause any serious harm.

If you are attacked by a shark, you should punch it in the nose as hard as you can.

FICTION - While this strategy has worked for a lucky few, it is not one that is recommended by shark experts. Most marine biologists advise not to do anything that might agitate or injure the shark, as that could make it more aggressive or attract other sharks to the area. If you do feel threatened, use a stick or other tool to fend it off, rather than your hands, and poke it in the eyes or gills instead of the nose.

It is illegal to kill a praying mantis in some parts of the United States.

FICTION - While praying mantises (or mantids) are beneficial in that they eat many insects we consider pests, they are not endangered, and there are no known federal or state laws that prohibit killing them. So, there is no need to turn yourself in to the authorities should a praying mantis have an unfortunate encounter with your lawn mower, hedge clippers or shoe.

Some red food colorings are made from ground-up beetles.

FACT - Many food items, including fruit juices, candies and flavored gelatin contain cochineal, carmine or carminic acid to give them a deep red color. These pigments are derived from the shells of the female *Dactylopius coccus* beetle, which is found in South and Central America. The dye has been used for centuries and dates back to the Aztecs. It is safer than most synthetic red dyes, apart from the rare allergic reaction.

Sunscreens with an SPF of 40 or 50 do not provide significantly more protection against UV rays than SPF-30 sunscreens.

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All centipedes have 100 legs.

FICTION - Since the word "centipede" comes from the Latin words for "hundred" and "foot," it's understandable that people would believe it to be true, but the name is more figurative than literal. Most centipedes actually only have 20 to 40 legs. There are some species that can have more than 300 (!) legs, but a centipede with exactly 100 legs would be tough to find -- not to mention rather tedious, counting all those legs.

A cockroach can survive for several days without its head.

FACT - Roaches do not need their heads to breathe -- oxygen is absorbed through spiracles (the insect version of gills) on their body -- and they can survive for a month without food. A headless cockroach will live for about a week until it dies of thirst.

Having a good "base tan" will help prevent sunburn if you'll be spending a lot of time in the sun.

FICTION - There is really no such thing as a "healthy tan." Visiting a tanning parlor before your Caribbean cruise or Hawaiian trip can cause just as much damage to your skin as the sun exposure you'll experience on your vacation. A dark tan on fair skin is only equivalent to a sunscreen with SPF 2 or 4, which won't provide much additional protection from the sun.

In a lifetime, the average person unknowingly eats eight spiders while asleep.

FICTION - Aren't you glad this one isn't true? Despite what you may have heard, there is no evidence that spiders secretly crawl into our mouths while we are sleeping. Hard as it may be for arachnophobes to believe, most spiders are more wary of us than we are of them. Even if you were lying perfectly still, your breathing would scare it off, so a spider is unlikely to hang out around your mouth. We hate to break this

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to you, but you probably unwittingly consume more spiders when you are awake -- in your food. The Food and Drug Administration guidelines indicate a certain level of whole insects or parts are acceptable in some food products, such as those containing fruits or vegetables.