

## One quarter of European food carries health claims

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A balanced diet is important for people's health and health claims are designed to help consumers' choose healthy food. The question is whether they actually influence consumers' behaviour and it is therefore essential to know how and in what amount consumers are exposed to claims on food. A recent study found that around one quarter of food products in Europe carry health claims but this figure differs between European countries. Researchers from the EU-funded project CLYMBOL ("Role of health-related CLaims and sYMBOLs in consumer behaviour") analysed how often and what type of claims and symbols were found on food package and found that one quarter (26%) of all products carried at least one claim. Most of these claims were nutrition claims (64%), followed by health claims (29%) and only 6% health-related ingredient claims. Health claims comprised mainly of general health claims and nutrient and other function claims, while hardly any reduction and disease risk claims and children's' development and health claims were found.

More than one third of the analysed nutrition claims referred to vitamins and/or minerals. Vitamin C (e.g., 'High in Vitamin C') was the most mentioned vitamin, while calcium (e.g., 'A source of calcium') was the most mentioned mineral. Only 16% of the health claims referred to vitamins or minerals. Over a third of the health claims (36%) referred to an unspecific nutrient(s) (e.g., 'Complete nutrition for optimal growth') and almost a fourth (21%) referred to the whole food without mentioning the specific nutrient (e.g., 'Cholesterol reducing'). Concerning macronutrients (fat, carbohydrates and protein), fat was the most commonly mentioned in health claims.

Around 6% of all claims that were found on food products were symbolic claims, meaning claims that convey their information in a non-verbal manner. Examples of health symbols with published criteria are the Dutch Choices logo, the Nordic Keyhole or the Finnish Heart Symbol.

The food category with the most found claims was food for special dietary use which included baby and infant food. No claims were found on egg products.

Most products tended to have more than one claim on their packages. Often, several nutrition claims were listed, e.g., 'No sugar, low calories'. Also, health claims were often accompanied by related nutrition claims, e.g., 'High in calcium' and 'Calcium is needed for the maintenance of normal bones'.

The researchers also found several country differences in these results. The highest number of nutrition claims could be seen in the UK (30%), followed by Spain (23%), Slovenia (19%), the Netherlands (17%) and Germany (16%). Most health claims were found in the Netherlands (14%), compared to Spain with the lowest (7%). The largest proportion of general health claims was found in the Netherlands (12%) – which could be because of the relatively common Dutch Choices logo, a symbolic (general) health claim. Nutrient and other function claims could be seen most often in Slovenia (on 9% of foods sampled), followed by the UK (7%), Germany (5%) and the Netherlands and Spain both at 3%.



In this study the researchers sampled and purchased over 2000 food and drink products, in order to extract and analyse all information available on their packaging, with particular reference to the various claims: Nutrition claims state a positive effect due to the food's nutrients, e.g., 'reduced fat', whereas a health claim states a connection between an ingredient and health, e.g., 'contains calcium which is necessary for bone growth'. A health-related ingredient claim refers to substances in a food product which are not nutrients but may have a nutritional or physiological effect, e.g., 'contains one of your five a day'. This study was performed in five European countries (DE, ES, NL, SI, UK), making this the first cross-country study analysing and comparing the status-quo of claims on food and drink products in Europe and beyond.

This CLYMBOL study is a timely update on what consumers currently find on the market, with a sample that allows for select cross-country comparisons. The results and the detailed description of the methodology inform policy makers and help monitor the use of claims across Europe. Research like this can further inform future decisions concerning changes in the regulation.

## For more information

Hieke S, et al. (2016). Prevalence of nutrition and health-related claims on pre-packaged foods: A five-country study in Europe. *Nutrients* 8 p. 137.