

## Health-related claims are perceived more positively when personally relevant

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The 'relevance' of a health-related claim is an important underlying motivational factor for the perceived benefit of and the willingness to purchase foods with health claims. Researchers from Finland, the UK, Germany and Italy analysed this in a survey-based study, showing that consumers who are directly affected by diabetes or where it is strongly relevant to them are more likely to perceive products with claims as healthy and beneficial and would buy those products.

Nutrition and health claims on food packages can be divided into nutrition claims which refer to the presence of a nutritionally beneficial compound or composition (e.g. low fat, high fibre), and health claims which can be either generic health claims or disease risk reduction claims. These health claims need to comply with criteria laid down in relevant EU legislation (Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006) and should be based on sound scientific evidence.

Little is known about how health-related claims are perceived, and the aim of the current study was to investigate how consumers perceive nutrition and health claims and how they respond to specific disease risk reduction claims, general health claims and nutrition claims. Additionally, it was analysed whether attitudes towards eating healthily and attitudes towards functional foods have an impact on perceptions relating to products with health claims.

The survey included 2,385 participants over 35 years old and, being part of the European HealthGrain project, focussed on motivational factors underlying wholegrain related nutrition and health claims with type 2 diabetes as the selected target disease. The questionnaire included three parts: (i) assessment of relevance to diabetes, (ii) measurement of the perception of the different claims, and (iii) questions on health-related attitude, subjective knowledge and use of functional foods. In the second part, nine cards described hypothetical products and the respondents had to rate them based on how healthy they believe the product is (perceived healthiness), how beneficial it is to them (benefit to me) and how likely it is that they would buy it (likelihood to buy).

Their findings indicate that when diabetes is relevant, especially to the individual, people are more likely to perceive products with claims as healthy and beneficial and have a stronger willingness to buy those products. Disease risk reduction claims tend to have the strongest effect. People who are already familiar with functional foods and have a general interest in healthy eating seem to perceive products with claims as healthy and are more willing to buy them, regardless of the type of claim that is provided. Moreover, in order to be influenced by health claims, consumers also need to have a positive attitude towards functional food products.

Overall, the study highlights the strength of the perceived relevance approach and emphasises that self-reported relevance measures the consumers' motivation directly and therefore is an important predictor.

The authors add that the role of perceived relevance should be taken into account in future research on the perception of health claims. They also recommend to investigate a larger range of disease risk reduction claims in order to better understand how consumers perceive and use the claims to eventually help them improve making better informed choices.

For further information, see

[Dean M, et al \(2012\). Perceived relevance and foods with health-related claims. Food Quality and Preference 24\(1\):129-135.](#)