

EUFIC reviews European consumers' responses to health claims

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A new review by the European Food Information Council and Aarhus University explores how European consumers respond to health claims on food and drink products. Specific attention is given to how product- and consumer-related factors affect attitudes, understanding and purchasing behaviour.

The authors conducted a literature search to discern the interplay between consumers and health claims, following a conceptual framework developed specifically for this purpose. The conceptual framework – devised by co-author Professor Klaus Grunert of Aarhus University – highlights that consumer understanding, attitudes and purchasing may be influenced by both product and consumer variables. Product variables include the food/drink category, format and wording of health claims, functional ingredient and benefit claimed, and taste/ sensory attributes the product possesses. Consumer variables include personal beliefs unrelated to specific claims and products (e.g. about the usefulness of functional foods in general), personal relevance (e.g. due to health concerns or health problems), familiarity with functional ingredients or products containing them and overall nutrition knowledge.

Overall, the studies indicate that acceptance of products with health claims is influenced by many different factors. Familiarity with the product, health claim or functional ingredient used plus personal relevance appear as the most important determinants. The choice of carrier product can determine to what extent people trust a health claim or are willing to try the respective product. Furthermore, consumers like simple wording, but they may also demand detailed explanations. Splitting claims into a short front-of-pack version complemented by more detailed explanations on the back of the pack has been offered as an approach to solve this dilemma.

Product healthfulness has to compete with other factors such as taste, brand and price, which appear to be more influential in the decision making process.

It is important to note that the comparability of findings is hindered by significant differences in study methodology as well as inter-individual characteristics, leading to partially conflicting results. Nevertheless, studies have provided evidence that people do not always understand health and nutrition claims as they are intended. However, there is limited quantitative information available on the proportion of consumers who correctly understand claims already in use, making it difficult to set targets for adequate levels of European consumer responses to health claims. Additionally, most of the studies investigating understanding of health claims relied on consumers' self-reported, i.e. subjective understanding. Hence, more research is required into objective consumer understanding of health claims.

For further information, see

[Wills JM, et al. \(2012\). European consumers and health claims - attitudes, understanding, and purchasing behaviour. Proceedings of the Nutrition Society. Published online: 05 March 2012. DOI:10.1017/S0029665112000043.](#)