



Consumers believe food can enhance health, but they are not consuming functional foods as a cure for particular health concerns.

Keep the food in functional foods

By Barbara Katz, HealthFocus International

We are now in the ever-increasing presence of what are termed “functional foods.” This category continues to be one of the fastest growing segments of the health and wellness market.

Functional or not, food, from a consumer perspective, continues to be food not medicine. The majority of consumers have little or no intention to use food to cure illness. So if food doesn’t taste like something they want to ingest, regardless of the ingredient claim, consumers simply won’t buy it. Even if it tastes great, consumers still have “believability limits” for what functional foods can accomplish.

According to the HealthFocus Trend Survey, only 30 percent of shoppers around the world always or usually choose foods for specific medical purposes. The most likely countries to do so were the U.S. and Mexico, with 37 percent of Americans and 36 percent of Mexicans claiming to always or often choose foods for medical purposes.

The lowest showing was in the U.K., where only 22 percent of people claim to choose foods for medical purposes. Even in China, where there are strong traditional beliefs that food contributes to general wellness and balance, only 30 percent of shoppers choose foods for those reasons.

However, to the contrary, 70 percent of shoppers around the globe agree or strongly agree that some foods contain active components that can reduce risk of diseases and improve long-term health. In the U.K., the country least likely to use food for specific medical purposes, 76 percent agree that food does indeed play a role in reducing disease risk. On this belief, the U.K. scored higher than any other country. In addition to their future health, 80 percent of consumers on average also believe that some foods contain active components that help maintain current health.

These statistics are not really contradictory. Diet is for prevention, not cure. Consumers tell us there are no “magic bullets” where food is concerned, and they view their diets holistically rather than depending on any one food to provide any certain health outcome. They do believe in the power of food to enhance their health but they are not consuming functional or fortified foods as a cure for any particular health concerns.

Generally, when it comes to fortification, consumers around the globe show the highest level of interest in well-known nu-

FOOD AS MEDICINE


	U.S.	China	U.K.	Brazil	Mexico
Always/usually choose foods for specific medical purposes	36%	30%	22%	27%	36%
Agree/somewhat agree some foods contain components that improve long-term health	69%	72%	76%	63%	69%
Agree/somewhat agree some foods contain components that help with current health	73%	84%	80%	87%	77%

Source: HealthFocus Intl.

trients such as calcium, iron and certain vitamins. But while consumers are interested in getting more of these things in their diets, it isn’t necessary to try to provide too much of a single nutrient in a product, especially if it will reduce the taste or sensory properties.

If consumers get sick, they may pay more attention to their diets, but they also will be managing illness via medical means. And remember: Consumers do not want to be identified by an illness. So even if they are managing an illness via diet, it’s generally not a good idea to identify products too closely with a disease.

People’s diets as they stand now are a proactive measure. Functional foods are important and, as they become more and more effective, there may come a day when that changes. But for now, the watchword for consumers is “balance.”

Maintaining wellness includes a number of factors, including diet, exercise and mental attitude. Consumers don’t expect food to “do it all” for them, and we should remember to maintain the taste and pleasure of food first and foremost. Don’t sacrifice your taste for a claim, because people expect to consume a number of foods on any given day to attain that balance. 

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