



## Q & A on Functional Foods

### Q. What are "functional foods"?

"Functional foods" is simply a convenient way to describe foods or their components which may provide a health benefit beyond basic nutrition. In other words, functional foods do more than meet your minimum daily requirements of nutrients—they also can play a role in reducing risk of disease and promoting good health.

While all foods are functional in that they provide nutrients, "functional foods" tend to be those with health-promoting ingredients or natural components that have been found to have potential benefit in the body. They can include whole foods as well as fortified, enriched or enhanced foods and dietary supplements that have a beneficial effect on health.

Today, researchers have identified hundreds of compounds with functional qualities, and they continue to make new discoveries surrounding the complex benefits of phytochemicals in foods.

The concept of functional foods is not entirely new, although it has evolved considerably over the years. In the early 1900s, food manufacturers in the United States began adding iodine to salt in an effort to prevent goiter, representing one of the first attempts at creating a functional component through fortification.

### Q. How does a food become "functional"?

Since many of these foods are just natural, whole foods with new information about their potential health qualities, they do not become "functional" except for the way we perceive them. On the other hand, functional foods can result from agricultural breeding or added nutrients/ingredients.

Many—if not most—fruits, vegetables, grains, fish, and dairy and meat products contain several natural components that deliver benefits beyond basic nutrition, such as lycopene in tomatoes, omega-3 fatty acids in salmon or saponins in soy. Even tea and chocolate have been noted in some studies as possessing functional attributes.

Agricultural scientists are able to boost the nutritional content of certain crops through the same breeding techniques that are used to bring out other beneficial traits in plants and animals—everything from beta-carotene-rich rice to vitamin-enhanced broccoli and soybeans, just to name a couple of examples. And research is under way to improve the nutritional quality of dozens of other crops.

Other foods may be specially formulated with nutrients or other ingredients.. This is true of products such as orange juice fortified with calcium, cereals with added vitamins or minerals, or flour with added folic acid. In fact, more and more foods are being fortified with nutrients and other

physiologically active components (such as plant stanols and sterols) as researchers uncover more evidence about their role in health and even disease risk reduction.

### **Q. What are some of the health benefits associated with functional foods?**

The scientific community has only just begun to understand the complex interactions between nutritional components and the human body. However, there is already a large body of scientific evidence showing that eating foods with functional benefits on a regular basis as part of a varied diet can help reduce the risk of, or manage a number of health concerns, including cancer, heart and cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal health, menopausal symptoms, osteoporosis and eye health, to name a few.

### **Q. How can I get more functional foods in my diet?**

The most effective way to reap the health benefits from foods is to eat a balanced and varied diet, including fruits and vegetables as well as foods with added beneficial components. Watch labels and read articles for information about foods and health. Before you decide to make any major dietary changes, however, take the time to evaluate your personal health, or speak to your health care provider on ways to help reduce your risk of certain diseases. It is also important to remember that there is no single "magic bullet" food that can cure or prevent most health concerns, even when eaten in abundance. The best advice is to choose foods wisely from each level of the food guide pyramid in order to incorporate many potentially beneficial components into the diet.

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