

## FITFORLIFE

LIVING WELL

SUNDAY

17 December 2006

NutriScene

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## Nutrition and health claims

Diet &amp; Nutrition

**Nutrition claims are now permitted on food labels: can we accept them as true?**

**L**OW in fat. High in calcium. Do these claims sound familiar to you? Nutrition information on food labels can be a source of nutrition knowledge. I believe that such information, accurately provided and properly used, can be a useful educational tool for the consumer.

In my previous article, I discussed one aspect of such information, namely, nutrition labelling or declaration of nutrient content of foods. In this instalment, I shall share with readers another aspect of nutrition information on food labels, namely nutrition and health claims.

You must have seen such claims on labels of milk powder, beverages, bread, biscuits, noodles and numerous other pre-packaged foods. You might be asking: are these claims permitted by the law? Can I believe what I read? How can I use the claims to help me in my food choices?

Nutrition claims are indeed permitted on food labels, with the enactment of a new regulation by the Health Ministry and enforced since 2005. Three types of nutrition claims are permitted. These are:

- Nutrient content claim
- Nutrient comparative claim
- Nutrient function claim

#### What are these permitted nutrition claims?

As the name suggests, nutrient content claims describe the level of a nutrient in a food product. A permitted nutrient content claim on the label of a beverage is, for example, "source of vitamin C" or "high in vitamin C". Similarly, such claims can be made for protein and 10 vitamins as well as five minerals. These are the so-called "good nutrients".

In contrast to the above, another type of nutrient content claim is, for example, "low in cholesterol" or "cholesterol free". These claims are for the so-called "bad nutrients", namely, energy, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, trans fatty acids, sugars and sodium.

There are, of course, no "bad nutrients", with the exception of trans fatty acids. All nutrients, including energy, fat, cholesterol, etc are all required for normal body functions. It is really the excessive intakes of these nutrients that are undesirable. Indeed, excessive intakes of vitamins and minerals too, are undesirable!

A nutrient comparative claim is a claim that compares the nutrient levels and/or energy values of two or more foods. One such claim is "less fat", or "reduced salt", etc. The opposing comparative claim is "extra vitamin A", or "more protein", and so

on.

The third type of nutrition claim is the nutrient function claim, which describes the physiological role of the nutrient in growth, development and normal functions of the body. An example of such a claim is: calcium helps in the making of strong bones and teeth.

Besides nutrients in the classical sense, there are permitted function claims for several food components. One such example is: plant sterol helps to lower blood cholesterol.

### Can I accept the nutrient content and comparative claims as true?

The said regulation on nutrition claims has set specific criteria to be met before each of the nutrition claims above can be made. Food manufacturers intending to make a "source of" or "high in" claim must ensure the food product contains a minimum amount of protein or the vitamin and mineral stipulated in the regulation. Similarly, the food intending to declare a "low in" or "free of" claim must not contain more than the levels stipulated in the regulations.

A further condition that must be met is that if a food label has any of the nutrition claims mentioned above, then it is compulsory for the amount of the four



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core nutrients (ie energy, protein, carbohydrate and fat) and the nutrient or food component that is being claimed to be declared on the label.



The food company is not required to submit the intended claim(s) to the Health Ministry for prior approval. The onus is on the company to ensure that the required criteria are met before making such claims on the food label. Enforcement officers of the Ministry can take samples from retail outlets to check on compliance and take action against offenders.

As a consumer, you can also help in ensuring compliance: check that the amount of nutrient declared meets the required criteria for nutrient content or comparative claims.

### Nutrition claims have to be proven through scientific studies

The Health Ministry has thus far announced a list of 32 function claims that are permitted under this regulation. These claims include those for nutrients and have been supported by scientific data for a long time.

An example of this is "iron is important for red blood cell formation". Many of these are in nutrition textbooks. Other claims on this list are those that are approved based on more recent scientific findings. These are mostly for non-nutrients, or the "other food components". An example is: "oat soluble fibre helps lower blood cholesterol".

Only the claims on this list are permitted. If the food industry wishes to propose a new claim for a nutrient or other food component, an application has to be made to the Ministry. An Expert Committee within the Ministry had been established to deliberate on the applications, based on scientific data submitted.

The law has also stipulated specific criteria that must be met before nutrient function claims are permitted on a label. The food must contain a specified minimum amount of the nutrient that is the subject of the claim.

### How do I make use of nutrition claims effectively?

Nutrition claims provide further information to the consumer, in addition to the declaration of amounts of nutrients on the label. Nutrient content claims and comparative claims provide descriptions of what those amounts of nutrients are; for example, high or low. Such descriptors should be viewed in



## Nutrition and health claims



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the right context and used appropriately. Amongst the same category or type of food, you may use such claims to guide you to select a brand. For example, amongst several similar beverages, you may give preference to the one with "high vitamin C" claim. Amongst various brands of curry chicken, you may prefer the one with "low sodium" claim.

However, you should not select a food merely based on one such claim. The beverage with the "high vitamin C" claim may have a high sugar content. Similarly, the curry chicken with the "low sodium" claim may have more fat compared to another brand.

It does not mean that a food that does not have a "low in fat" claim is bad for you. Similarly, it does not mean that a food with a "cholesterol free" claim is the best choice. What I would like to emphasise is that you must look for the overall nutritional profile of the food and not just rely one or two claims on the label.

Nutrient function claims are meant to provide factual information to the consumer regarding the physiological function of that particular nutrient or food component. These are meant to be

nutrition information that a consumer can use, together with other nutrition information from various sources. These claims should not imply that the nutrient cures, treats or protects a person from diseases.

### Disease-related health claims are not permitted

Claims linking a nutrient to a disease is not permitted, for example, disease risk reduction claims. Hence, a claim (commonly known as a health claim) that "nutrient A helps reduce risk to coronary heart disease" is not permitted.

Consumers should realise that chronic diseases have multiple causes and taking a particular nutrient or food component alone will not reduce risk to coronary heart diseases, diabetes or cancers.

In addition to taking that nutrient or food, one must practise overall healthy eating and adopt a healthy lifestyle. The consumer should not be misled by a health claim and consumes excessive amounts of this food and omit other items from his diet.

These disease reduction claims are still being deliberated in the Health Ministry. Careful considerations are being given to ensure that such claims are indeed going to be useful to consumers. The wordings for such claims have to be carefully thought through to minimise misunderstanding by the consumers.

### You can help monitor nutrition claims in the country

The food industry would like to have nutrition claims on food labels to further provide information on the nutrients contained in the product offered for sale. In addition, nutrition claims may help a food company sell its products. There has, therefore, been an increase in interest among food companies in having nutrition claims on their product labels. Similarly, we also see more nutrition claims in food advertisements in the print and electronic media.

The consumer must attempt to understand what these claims mean in order to make full use of the information provided through such claims. You can also help monitor and determine if the nutrition claims made are those permitted by the Ministry.

You should also note that the nutrition claims permitted in advertisements are also the same as those allowed on food labels. You could provide feedback to the Ministry on your understanding of these claims, if you find them useful at all and how you have used the information provided. Such information will be most useful to the authorities in reviewing the implementation of this regulation.

Note: For details of the nutrition claims regulations, including the criteria and the list of permitted function claims, readers may refer to the Guide to Nutrition Labelling and Claims published by the Health Ministry or to the actual regulations. An electronic version of the said Guide is available on the Nutrition Society of Malaysia website: [www.nutriweb.org.my](http://www.nutriweb.org.my)

■ NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with 34 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail [starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my). The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.