

Nature gets a hand ...; Meg Carter
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Byline: Meg Carter
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Positive food additives promise health benefits on a plate, but can they deliver, asks Meg Carter

"Natural good, processed bad" is the view shared by many British shoppers frightened by health scares ranging from BSE and GM food to Sudan 1. But growing anxiety about our health and an acceptance that responsibility for it may rest in our own hands is fuelling soaring sales of nutraceuticals, so-called functional foods and drinks manufactured to contain positive additives to make us healthier, such as probiotics and calorie-reducing spreads.

Without doubt, functional foods are proving great business for a food industry battered by recent criticism that an over-emphasis on super-sizing, high fat, salt and sugar content has fuelled unhealthy lifestyles and overeating. British consumers' spending on functional foods and drinks is fast approaching Pounds 1 billion and could double that by 2010.

However, the dizzying array of functional additives now slipping into our daily diet - good bacteria to aid healthy gut function and plant sterols to lower blood cholesterol - raises an important issue. Do we really need to buy specially manufactured functional products, such as cholesterol-lowering spreads, many of which are priced at a premium? Wouldn't we be better off upping our intake of the unprocessed products in which many functional food ingredients occur naturally?

According to Julian Mellentin, the author of *The Functional Foods Revolution*, the answer lies in 21st-century consumers' preoccupation with quick fixes. Functional foods are the food industry's future, he believes. "Consumers now look for health benefits from what they eat and the food industry is focused on building positive additives into their products to meet this demand."

Functional foods represent a simple solution to our growing health worries, agrees a food industry analyst, Susie Johnson, of Leatherhead Food International. "The older you get the more you worry about stiff joints, heart attacks and cognitive decline," she says. "To feel like 30 once you hit your 50s you must do something about it today. This is why British consumers are increasingly aware of the need to take control of their health and eager to avoid the diseases associated with old age; the role food companies believe functional foods can play."

Good news for a healthier Britain? Not necessarily. Nutritional experts are divided not only on whether functional foods are the future or simply cynical money-spinners for some of the food companies behind

them but also on what role these foods should play in our daily diet.

Tom Sanders, a professor of nutrition and dietetics at King's College London, dismisses any suggestion that natural products are inherently better than those manufactured to contain functional additives. "Scepticism about functional foods purely because they contain additives is misguided. Food is made of chemicals and often contains naturally occurring toxins that are far more dangerous than food additives. While I remain sceptical about certain products - for example, probiotics; how can you define what a claim such as 'Helps to maintain normal gut flora' means - others, such as cholesterol-lowering spreads, have an important role to play," he says.

Catherine Collins, the chief dietitian at St George's Hospital, South London, disagrees. "Functional foods containing positive additives, however, are no substitute for a naturally balanced diet." She advises anyone who thinks that they should eat more healthily to reassess their diet, then work towards striking the right balance in their nutritional intake. The Mediterranean diet is the ultimate functional diet, she believes, with fruit and vegetables, whole-grain cereals, carbs, a modest amount of meat, olive oil and oily fish. "If pursued, there's no need for functional foods. And you don't need to strive for perfect balance every day; nutritional intake averaged out over a week is what counts," she says.

An over-emphasis on recommended daily intake is part of an unhealthy yet growing obsession with the minutiae of what we eat, Collins adds. It's all very well worrying about E numbers and trans- fats, but you need to keep sight of the bigger picture. "Any margarine based on hydrogenated fat has the potential to create trans-fats, which the body finds harder to break down. But if you have high cholesterol, trans-fats are a lesser concern if a product containing hydrogenated fat helps you to keep your cholesterol in check."

Of the functional foods on sale in the UK, cholesterol-lowering products are regarded by many experts as the most useful - for those people with high cholesterol. Greater scepticism, however, surrounds functional foods with technical-sounding ingredients or less specific claims. "Omega-3, while widely regarded as a positive additive, is yet to be embraced in Britain as it has been in countries such as Australia," Mellentin says. "Despite its demonstrable benefits, it sounds alien, which puts off many British consumers. In contrast, added dietary fibre is often promoted for an ability to increase the body's absorption of calcium, which so far has been proven only with lab rats."

Daniel Dumoulin, a branding consultant whose company, Sundance, has recently completed an in-depth study of consumer attitudes towards functional foods, points to a recent Mintel report showing that 69 per cent of us don't know which products are healthy because expert advice keeps changing. While, emotionally, British consumers prefer natural products, "Not everyone may like the sound of functional foods today, but lifestyles, social trends and advances in food technology are pushing us towards them," Dumoulin adds.

Ten years ago there were 300 scientific reviews of functional foods' health claims each year; by 2003 this had risen to more than 1,200. "The trouble is that many people don't know the difference between

good and bad scientific studies, and some products are given greater credence than they deserve," Mellentin says.

Despite this, functional-food sales continue to rise and efforts are under way within the food industry to better educate consumers and to challenge preconceptions about additives and naturalness. And about time, too, Professor Sanders believes, although more education is still needed.

"For the time being, functional foods tend to be used by the worried well who, by default, are better informed. The real problem is the majority who don't care about their diet at all," he says.

COMING TO A SUPERMARKET NEAR YOU

The future of functional foods are products which reputedly have health and/or cosmetic benefits:

TipTopUp bread, a loaf rich in added Omega-3 fish oils - not yet launched in the UK but popular in Australia - is marketed as a way of aiding cognitive function, heart and eye health. Earlier this year Waitrose introduced a variety enriched with selenium, a mineral which some studies found to benefit the immune system and regulate blood pressure.

SkinCola, to be launched in the UK soon, is an oxygen-enhanced purified water developed to boost the immune system and promote cell growth and repair - as well as quench your thirst, of course.

Inneov is a dietary supplement developed in partnership between the food company Nestle and the cosmetics company L'Oreal to improve the look of skin, hair and nails. This fusion of the latest food industry know-how and cutting-edge innovation in beauty science is

likely to be a driving force behind

the further development of functional foods.

Kewpi +U is a Japanese

product range of health and beauty foods for the over-50s, containing

hyaluronic acid - found in shark skin and whale cartilage - which is meant to help the body retain moisture.

Yagua Beauty Juice is marketed

as a Dutch 100 per cent natural, anti-ageing drink, and contains aloe

vera and collagen which the makers claim improves skin.

Emmi yoghurt range, launched

recently, contains aloe vera

and promises to improve skin.

Illustrations/Photos:

Caption: Health winners or money spinners? Sales of functional foods are booming. Photograph by RICHARD CANNON

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