



Functional Foods: Fad or Fact?

If you've seen the term functional food and wondered what exactly that means, you aren't alone. While the connection between the food we eat and our overall health is not a new concept, the linking of specific foods or ingredients to unique aspects of our health is relatively new and has led to a boom in what are being called functional foods.



What are Functional Foods?

Just about everything we eat provides energy and nutrients and could be seen as "functional," but the term is typically associated with foods that offer extra health benefits. According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, functional foods are defined as "whole foods along with fortified, enriched, or enhanced foods that have a potentially beneficial effect on health when consumed as part of a varied diet on a regular basis at effective levels." Functional foods typically fall into three categories - those that contain beneficial components naturally, such as the antioxidants in oranges; those that have been fortified with beneficial ingredients, such as eggs with added omega-3s; and synthesized ingredients such as resistant starches.



Are Functional Foods safe?

All foods in the US, whether considered functional or not are regulated in the same way. Many functional foods carry claims related to the type of nutrients they contain or their role in our health. These claims are regulated and foods that carry them must meet the defined criteria which are based on available scientific evidence.



Bottom Line

There is growing research that supports the benefits of certain foods beyond the basic nutrients they provide. While no single food has been proven to prevent or cure any illness, eating a variety of foods, including those considered functional, is one aspect of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. If you want to try out some functional foods that naturally contain beneficial components, check out the monthly Superfood in your café.



REFERENCES:

1. Crowe KM, Francis C. Position of the academy of nutrition and dietetics: functional foods. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2013 Aug;13(8):1096-103
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