



Foods that claim to lower cholesterol or boost circulation

are promoted as an easy way to better health – but do they work, and are they worth spending money and Syns on?

Health off the shelf

Eating healthily used to be just a case of choosing foods that were naturally healthy. But now, supermarket shelves are full of 'functional foods' that promise to improve our health by reducing cholesterol, lowering blood pressure, boosting heart health or improving concentration.

Functional foods are not the same as 'fortified foods', such as bread or cereals that have added vitamins. 'A food that's been enriched or fortified has basically had nutrients added that were lost during the manufacturing process. Sometimes they focus on a specific one, for example folic acid,' explains clinical nutritionist Seki Tijani. 'In contrast, functional foods are supposed to serve a purpose, such as lowering cholesterol or blood pressure, or improving digestion. Instead of focusing on the nutrients, a functional food focuses on the health benefits it can bring you.'

The range of functional foods on the market includes spreads, yogurts and yogurt drinks, bread, milk, eggs, cheese and cereal bars, worth £125 million altogether in sales each year, according to market analysts TNS. This is tiny (we spend over £200 million a year on baked beans alone) but TNS says functional foods are one of the fastest-growing sectors.

Big food companies clearly think they're onto a winner, and the advertising for functional foods gives the impression that by downing a yogurt drink or chewing a cereal bar each day, you can perform mini medical miracles. But how far is this really the case – and what are the pros and cons as far as slimmers are concerned? We look at some of the evidence:

Food for thought

ARE FUNCTIONAL FOODS A GOOD THING?

The British Dietetic Association (BDA) says: 'Although some functional foods are expensive and it's possible to get the beneficial ingredients in a cheaper way by eating a healthy diet, they are convenient in today's busy world and may offer health benefits.'

But not everyone is convinced. Dr Tom McMillan of the Food Ethics Council says: 'Functional foods are not a technical development to promote good health, but are more about the idea of selling health.'

'If functional foods work like medicines, surely they should be regulated as carefully and be available to everyone who needs them, not just to people

who can pay premium prices. And fortifying everyone's food with things like fluoride or folic acid raises the issue of whether it's right to mass-medicate people without their consent, and forces us to ask why people aren't getting enough nutrients through their diet in the first place.'

ARE THEY SAFE?

All functional foods are subject to testing by the Food Standards Agency's Foods, Additives and Supplements Division to ensure they're safe to eat. In addition, health claims are subject to a voluntary code of practice. But as Dr Joanne Lunn from the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF), says, 'Manufacturers often do their own tests and research and the current

legislation doesn't stop companies from making health claims.'

New European laws on food and health claims, passed in May 2006, will bring testing, claims and labelling under much closer scrutiny, but do not come into force for three years.

DO THEY WORK?

The amount of beneficial ingredients in functional foods varies from product to product and between manufacturers, so it's important to read labels to see how much of each the manufacturer says you should eat or drink to gain benefits. Sometimes the products have added sugar or salt or are high in fat, so you need to weigh up whether you want to consume the additional ingredients too.

Foods that lower blood pressure

Which foods?

Flora pro.activ blood pressure mini yogurt drink, ~~Sereet juice~~ (?)

What do they do?

Functional foods that claim to lower blood pressure usually contain dairy peptides, or small proteins made from milk. 'Research has shown that dairy peptides can help control blood pressure by working with the body's natural blood pressure mechanisms,' says the BDA. 'However, they only work when blood pressure levels are above normal.'

VERDICT

'While these types of drinks may have some benefit in lowering blood pressure in people whose blood pressure is high, they do not replace prescription medication or physical activity,' advises Dr Charmaine Griffiths of the British Heart Foundation (BHF). 'People with high blood pressure should talk to their doctor.'

Or try this:

Cutting down on salt and alcohol, drinking more water, taking regular exercise and losing excess weight is a medically recommended route to lowering high blood pressure and can reduce it to normal levels in weeks.

SWEET SPOT: Chocolate that lowers cholesterol may sound like a fantasy but could soon be on the way

Foods that improve digestion

Which foods?

Müller Vitality Probiotic Yogurt, Actimel Yogurt Drinks, Activia Yogurt, Yakult.

What do they do?

Probiotics are a form of live bacteria that may be beneficial for gut health. Our digestive systems contain 3-4lbs of bacteria, and normally about a third of these are helpful to the system. 'The balance can change as a result of taking antibiotics, a poor diet with too much fat and not enough fibre, food poisoning, irregular meals, stress or as a result of diarrhoea,' says a BDA spokesperson.

So does taking extra doses of beneficial bacteria help? 'No wide scale

studies have been done yet,' says Dr Lunn of the BNF. 'Lots of work is being done, but it's hard to measure good microflora, so studies are very small scale.' Tests have shown that the effective ingredient in some products doesn't survive long enough in the digestive system to be beneficial. Some brands are high in sugar.

VERDICT

'It's great that probiotics highlight the importance of gut bacteria, which a lot of people didn't know about before,' says nutritionist Seki Tijani. 'If someone has low levels of gut bacteria, then the products may make a difference. But for someone who has a healthy gut, I don't think it would be enough to make a huge difference.'

Or try these:

Fruit, vegetables, whole grain cereals.

Foods for a healthier heart

Which foods?

Flora pro.activ Light spread, Benecol, Columbus Eggs, St Ivel Gold Omega 3.

What do they do?

High levels of LDL cholesterol is a common problem that can contribute to heart disease, and many functional foods claim to be able to help, such as products with plant stanols and sterols. 'Plant-sterol-enriched cholesterol-lowering products help to reduce the absorption of cholesterol and so lower the level of potentially harmful cholesterol in the blood,' says Dr Charmaine Griffiths of the British Heart Foundation (BHF).

Chocolate that lowers cholesterol may sound like a fantasy, but may soon be on the way as Masterfoods, which makes Mars bars, has launched a range of functional chocolate snacks in the USA.

Omega 3, a type of polyunsaturated fat found in oily fish and some plants, is also linked to heart health. Some doubts

were cast recently by research in the *British Medical Journal*, which suggested no clear benefit, but the jury is still out. 'Until now, medical research has demonstrated a benefit from Omega 3 fats in protecting people from heart and circulatory disease,' says Dr Mike Knapp from the BHF. 'People shouldn't stop consuming omega 3 fats.'

VERDICT

'Cholesterol-lowering products could play a useful role in the overall strategy of maintaining a healthy heart for some people, but they should only be consumed as part of a balanced diet,' said Dr Griffiths. 'Most people can also improve their heart health by reducing the amount of fat in their diet, especially saturated fat, and to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day,' she adds.

Or try these:

Oats, nuts and seeds, particularly pistachios, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, contain plant sterols and can help lower cholesterol. Oily fish and linseed oil contain Omega 3, and a healthy, balanced diet with regular exercise is proven to help maintain a healthy heart.



Are they worth spending your Syns on?

Here we've looked at the number of servings the manufacturers recommend you have per day of some of the best known functional foods, and see how they stack up Syns- and pricewise:

FOOD	RECOMMENDED SERVINGS PER DAY	SYNS PER SERVING	TOTAL SYNS PER RECOMMENDED DAILY INTAKE	PRICE
Actimel Yogurt Drink	At least one 100g bottle	100g bottle Original: 4 Syns Strawberry/Orange: 4½ Syns 0.1% Original or Pineapple: 1½ Syns	1½ Syns to 4½ Syns, depending on flavour	£2.34 per 8 bottles.
Benecol Light Spread	two to three 10g portions	2 Syns per 2 level tsp	4 to 6 Syns	£3.99 per 500g
Flora pro.activ blood pressure mini yogurt drink	One 100g bottle	100g bottle Strawberry: 4 Syns	4 Syns	£2.48 per 4 bottles
Columbus Eggs	One egg	Free	Free	£1.39 per 6
Müller Vitality Probiotic Yogurt	One pot	3 to 3½ Syns per 150g pot, depending on flavour	3 to 3½ Syns, depending on flavour	£1.98 per 6 pots
St Ivel Gold Omega 3	28g per day	2 Syns per 2 level tsp	5 Syns	£1.38 per 500g

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Foods that boost brain power

Which foods?

iQ3 Brainstorm Cereal Bars, St Ivel Advance Milk, Intelligent Eating Eggs, Sparky Brand juice, bread and chicken.

What do they do?

As well as being good for the heart, Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids have been linked to improvements in concentration and IQ although the evidence on this is less clear. Several studies have been conducted into the effects, particularly on children, and results indicate that consuming the essential fatty acids may boost concentration abilities although it is not clear how much is needed and how often to benefit.

'Omega 3 and Omega 6 long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids are a key structural component of the brain and

eye, and play an important role in behaviour, concentration and co-ordination,' says nutrition consultant, Dr Jackie Stordy. 'The body can't make enough of these fatty acids, so we must get them from our diet.'

VERDICT

'Incorporating Omega 3 fats into everyday foods allows people who don't eat enough oily fish, or none at all, to gain the health benefits of these fats,' says a BDA spokesperson.

Or try these:

Oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel and tuna, and linseed oil. □

What do you think?

Have you found any benefits from functional foods – are they a godsend or a gimmick? Write to us at *Slimming World Magazine*, PO Box 5062, Alfreton, Derbyshire D55 4ZR or e-mail editorial@slimming-world.com

THE BOTTOM LINE

Many people do find functional foods beneficial, but eating special yogurts and spreads every day won't help if the rest of the time you're filling up on chocolate and vodka! And they are no substitute for prescribed medication, so take professional advice on any health worries. Losing 10 per cent of your body weight, if you are overweight to start with, exercising regularly, and eating a wide variety of foods including lots of fruit, vegetables and whole grain cereals, is proven to benefit many health problems, including lowering blood pressure and high cholesterol and improving poor digestion.