

Health Claims on Polyphenols: Regulatory Development and Consumer Education in Asia

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The number and diversity of presentations on plant polyphenols in this Conference is a clear indication of the amount of scientific interest and activities on this subject. A large volume of literature now exists, documenting studies into the physiological role and health benefits of polyphenols in various plant foods. Many of these studies are focused on the potential role of these bioactive ingredients in reducing the risk to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and some types of cancers.

It is understandable that the health benefits of these bioactive components found in many plant foods must be made known to the consumer. Hence the food industry has used various ways of promoting these foods or their ingredients to the consumer. These could be through advertorials with general write-ups on the potential health benefits of polyphenols. They could also be more direct advertisements in newspapers, magazines and TV of the benefits of polyphenols or the foods containing them. With the continued increase of diet-related chronic diseases, the consumer is certainly attracted to the promise that these potent antioxidants may be beneficial in warding off these ills.

The regulatory agencies are certainly not against informing the consumer of the potential beneficial effects of consuming foods with polyphenols. It is however important that the claims are sufficiently substantiated and within the permitted regulatory system of the country. The food must certainly contain sufficient amounts of the polyphenols to make the claims! Those communicating substantiated health benefits on polyphenols must be sieved out from those making wild claims. There are sufficient legal provisions for making health claims on polyphenols, both from an international perspective as well as national authorities in the region.

Codex Guidelines for use of nutrition and health claims 2004 makes provision for making health claims. The permitted health claims are nutrient function claims, other function claims and reduction of disease risk claims. In the context of Polyphenols, the relevant claims are last two wherein the beneficial effects of the consumption of certain food constituents are allowed. In addition, Codex has also provided guidance to governments on the scientific substantiation of health claims. These include guidelines related to the process for substantiation and the criteria required. In several Asian countries, other function claims are permitted and they relate to several bioactive components including several dietary fibres and non-digestible oligosaccharides, and plant sterols. Disease risk reduction claims are considered higher level claims and are permitted only in a few countries and only for a few foods or bioactive compounds. None of the health claims in the region relate to polyphenols.

Whilst the science of the health benefits of polyphenols continue to be unravelled, the regulatory framework for making these claims need to be improved in the region. There are certainly legal provisions for making these health claims. The regulatory framework, however, needs to be developed to facilitate the reviewing of health claims. Whilst the intention is to inform consumers of the health benefits of polyphenols, such information must be appropriately utilised.

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