

Consumers lack understanding of functional foods – a survey in an Australian university population

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Functional foods continue to emerge onto the Australian market. The Australia & New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) have preliminarily defined functional foods as 'similar in appearance to conventional foods and intended to be consumed as part of a usual diet, but modified to serve physiological roles beyond the provision of simple nutrient requirements' (1). By this definition, Australia has many functional foods available to consumers, however there is no evidence to suggest that this has been matched by a greater consumer understanding of these products. Whilst Roze (1999) found 69% of consumers surveyed (n = 1200) had heard of functional foods, it remains unclear whether consumers actually possess an understanding of functional foods (2). Goldberg (1994) suggests that if asked their view on functional foods, most consumers would respond with 'what is a functional food?' (3). This study aimed to assess current consumer understanding of functional foods in a sample university population.

A self-completed questionnaire was distributed to 1187 general staff at the University of Newcastle, with a response rate of 52.6%. Data was analysed based on whole sample population responses and by age category comparisons. Sixty two percent of respondents did not know what a functional food was, and those respondents who thought they knew, had minimal knowledge and understanding. The majority of staff (51%) chose an American definition over ANZFA's (17%), and less than 7% of respondents were able to correctly choose all 5 functional foods from a list of 10 food items. Furthermore, when asked to identify a functional food purchased or consumed within the last 12 months, 59.2% identified a product that was not a functional food. Respondents in the 56–65 age category scored consistently lower than other age groups, despite being significantly (P < 0.05) more likely to purchase functional foods if they claimed to improve their health. Forty five percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would not purchase functional foods if they contained genetically modified foods.

If the term 'functional food' is to be used, a consensus on an appropriate definition must be established and portrayed to consumers. In doing so, a clear distinction between the terms 'genetically modified foods' and 'functional foods' needs to be addressed. Health claims may provide an avenue to increase the profile of functional foods in Australia, as they can disseminate information to consumers regarding their physiological benefits. Marketing strategies targeting the 56–65 age group may be important, as this age group appears to be the most likely to purchase functional foods, but are the least educated on these products.

1. National Food Authority. Functional Foods Policy Discussion Paper. Canberra: NFA, 1994.
2. Roze A. Matching your message to your market place and increasing consumer share. IBC Conference. Melbourne: Nutrients and Fortified Foods, 1999.
3. Goldberg I. Functional Foods, Designer Foods, Pharmafoods, Nutraceuticals. New York: Chapman & Hall, 1994.