

How To Eat Healthy

By Sandy Cook

Most of us call them “health foods,” but experts in the field term them “functional foods.”

This is the term for foods enriched with specially derived vitamins, minerals, bacteria, herbs and even actual medicines. This “health food” trend is extremely popular and seems to know no end.

While this may sound like a new term, functional foods have been around for decades. In the US it started in the 1920s when iodine was introduced to table salt to prevent goiter. Since then, we've been able to purchase vitamin D enriched milk, yogurt with added acidophilus cultures to aid digestion, herb-enriched teas, enriched flour, and even candy with added nutrients. Over time, this has become an international industry, with Finland leading the way.

The Finnish have long been known for their healthy eating habits. Rye, cranberries, oats, barley, berries of different kinds, and even pine bark (when times were tough) were common ingredients in the Finnish diet. Altogether, they provided the roughage needed plus other key nutrients – possibly familiar to avid label readers -- like flavanoids, lignans, and pro- and prebiotics.

While some new food products have been proven to be effective, the market is – as experts point out – glutted with products that make claims they can't support. It is advisable to do your own research on functional foods. While eating a balanced diet and getting exercise is the best way to stay healthy, it's good to investigate what's being developed. You might want to ask your doctor, or a well-informed store clerk, for advice about what might be just right for you.

The 1950s saw a marked decline in the health of the general Finnish populace, which sparked a determination to develop foods that would restore them to their former health. To do that, the Finns melded their deep-rooted knowledge regarding diet with the latest technology.

Here are some of the most prominent developments among functional foods that are now available:

- Xylitol: Many of us know of this cavity-fighting sweetener, developed in the 1970s, which is found in chewing gum and toothpaste and mouthwash. Experiments have shown that it also reduces the likelihood of inner ear infections in young children.
- Prebiotics: One familiar example of this is acidophilus, a common bacterial culture additive commonly found in yogurt and milk. This form of lactic acid can prevent or cure intestinal disorders while also protecting intestines from harmful microbes and toxins. It's also been known to reduce allergies.
- Benecol: Launched in 1995 in the world's first plant sterol margarine, this has proven

successful in reducing bad cholesterol.

- PanSalt: Manufactured and marketed in the US as Cardia Salt, this low-sodium salt was developed in Finland back in the 1970s. We have the Finns to thank for discovering how to make a blood-pressure-reducing mineral salt actually taste good.
- Multi-Bene: Meaning multiply beneficial, this blend of plants sterols, plus magnesium and potassium salts, lowers high serum cholesterol in both test animals and human subjects. It's also been shown to lower blood pressure and the effects of genetic obesity.
- Yosa: Just one of the most recent examples of what oats can do for you; this yogurt product contains fermented oat bran. This fruit-flavored dairy product reportedly reduces the likelihood of heart disease while also pleasing the palate.
- Lactose free products: Lactose intolerance is quite common in Finland, so it's not surprising that one of their firms, Valio, has advanced a line of suitable products, including an entirely lactose-free milk.

For more information, visit www.acsh.org, the website for the American Council on Science and Health. The ACSH counsels people to be skeptical, and to look for the FDA-approved "health claim" labels on packaging. The ACSH also evaluates various food additives. For instance, it bestows a "very strong" recommendation for foodstuffs containing whole soy and soy protein, whole oats, psyllium, and for sugarless chewing gum. Fish with omega-3 fatty acids receive a rating of "strong."

The conclusion appears to be that functional foods have their place. Still, we all need to be responsible consumers, reading labels and asking questions. Oh – and maybe purchasing a really good, up-to-date dictionary.