

Primary preferences analysis of consumers in Constanta regarding their attitude to consume foods with health benefits

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Abstract

Expansion opportunity of functional foods on market is positive and consumer interest relatively high. This study attempted to identify the importance for consumer purchase and consumption of functional foods, but also identify their attitudes about the need for scientific justification and communication of health benefits for functional food. Research results have shown that consumers are beginning to attach greater importance to healthy eating, 32.99% of respondents believing that this criterion is of great importance in their consumption habits. Most consumers have considered it very important to permit health claims for functional foods by authorized agencies (74.29%), the need for scientific support of health benefits (64.94%) and their communication to the public (89.35%).

Keywords: functional foods, health benefits, consumers, primary preferences, claims, consumption

1. Introduction

The new coordinates of the socio-economic development based on the industrial development and industrial heartlands, the declining rural population and the increasing of the urban one on the development of thinking and economic culture, have provided many benefits in terms of improvement in many aspects of the quality of life and human health, but have generated changes in how they interact, in the availability of leisure, their access to food and their level of physical activity. In general, people have a greater access to a wide variety of foodstuffs and their daily routine requires less physical activity. These changes have led to difficulty in maintaining the balance between intake and need, leading to an increase in the frequency of overweight and obesity worldwide. Also, there has been registered an increased incidence of the cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.

It is obvious that the aspects related to lifestyle, diet and physical activity play an important role in the increase of the incidence of these diseases, and the success of the reduction measures will depend strikingly on the balance between these factors. This lead to the conclusion that food may contribute to maintaining the health on a long term basis, in ways not recognized until now, which means a new dimension of appreciation of how food can positively influence the health and welfare of the people, beyond providing the nutrients needed [4].

Thus, is beginning a new era in nutrition, reflected in the changing of the consumer attitudes, such as:

- reduce their interest in harmful substances;
- attention shown for compounds that promote health;
- conviction that, by a correct attitude including nutrition cancer may be avoided;

- awareness of a link between the physical or mental state and food, as well as between diet, longevity and appearance;
- the belief that diet provides more promising solutions for our health than those offered by medical surgery [3].

Expansion opportunity on market of functional food seems to be quite favorable, and consumer interest is quite high. However, the distribution of these products on the market is hampered by a number of obstacles. Insufficient clarity of information provided by producers is reflected in the difficulty of control of functional foods before marketing. Disinformation of traders and often of consumers may involve a number of risks, especially to the latter, due not only to the deficiencies in the operation of the health benefits of functional foods, but sometimes also due to the affectation of their state of health.

Consumer interest in the relationship between diet and health increased the request for information about functional food. The scientific and technological rapid progress, increasing healthcare costs, changes in food legislation affecting the label and the product claims, an aging population and increasing interest in providing health through diet are among the factors fueling the interest in the functional food. Scientific research reveals many proven clinical effects and potential benefits on health of the components of food. These benefits continue to expand the health claims now permitted to be identified by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [5].

The availability of a clear framework for conducting scientific assessment of benefits claims on foods is useful to all stakeholders. Thus, consumers have the insurance that claims have been validated and that all claims are evaluated on the same criteria. Manufacturers and retailers who wish to seek such claims will know what evidence should be provided to substantiate them. Regulators thus have a clear understanding of the limits of validity of any claims [4].

2. Materials and method

The purpose of this research was to identify the importance of buying and consumption of foods with health benefits among population in Constanta.

Research objectives have been as follows:

- to collect information on primary preferences of consumers in Constanta, regarding their attitude to consume foods with health benefits;
- to identify consumer view on the need for scientific justification and communication of health benefit on functional food;
- consumption habits of different consumer segments;
- criteria used by consumers in assessing the different types of products for purchase;
- to estimate how consumer preferences are affected, depending on income, age and / or gender;

The research was focused exclusively among potential consumers of food in Constanta looking for gathering information about their perceptions on food with health benefits, on the need for scientific justification on health benefits of food and their public communication.

To ensure the representativeness of the sample it was considered a confidence level of 0.05 (corresponding to a probability of ensuring research results of 95%), a margin of error of +/- 5% and a p-value = 0.5% (assuming that the key attribute rated is buying food with health benefits and that 50% of consumers prefer those products) [2]. Sample size was of 385 persons.

The interviews took place in supermarkets from Constanta on alternative days of the working week, both morning and afternoon. Most of the questions had two or multiple responses and some were open questions.

The survey was conducted between 1st and February 28th, 2010. In all cases, the method used to collect information was personal survey (face-to-face) [1].

3. Results and discussion

The sample consisted of 385 respondents, approximately two thirds of whom are women (66.3%) and 33.7% men. This sample structure is considered as representative assuming that mainly women are responsible for their family shopping.

Regarding the age, 15.7% of the respondents belonged to an age group between 18 to 24 years, 21.6% from 25 to 34 years, 23.4% between 35 and 49 years, 20.2% between 50 and 64 years and respectively, 19.1% 65 years or more.

Regarding family structure 21.9% of the respondents come from families consisting of two adults, 26.8% from families consisting of two adults and one child, 38.7% of families consisting of two adults and two children, 4.4% of families consist of two adults and three or more children and 8.2% of respondents are in other situations. Regarding the education level of the respondents 10.3% are graduates of secondary level, 17.5% graduated professional level, high-school graduates 27.2%, 35.2% of university level and respectively 9.8% of postgraduate level.

What regards the socio-professional category of the respondents, most of them were employed in contract work (69.4%), 11.3% were retired, 11.3% were housewives, 3.2% were employed part-time while the remaining 5.8% were unemployed. In addition, the average income per family member ranged as follows: 14.4% below 500 lei, 18.1% between 501 to 700 lei, 33.1% from 701 to 1000 lei, 18.8% between 1001 - 1500 RON and respectively, 15.6% over 1500lei.

Of the 385 respondents, 9.87% appreciated criterion „healthy food” as most important in food choice (Figure 1) and 32.99% considered this criterion as of great important in their consumption habits (Figure 2).

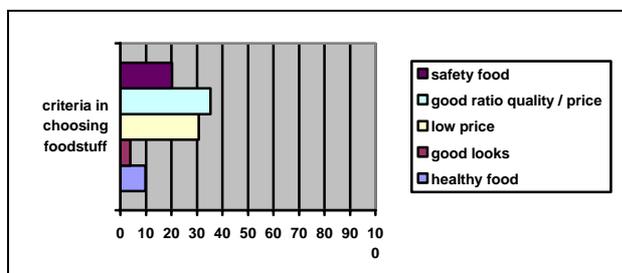


Figure 1. The opinion of the consumers regarding the criteria of food choices

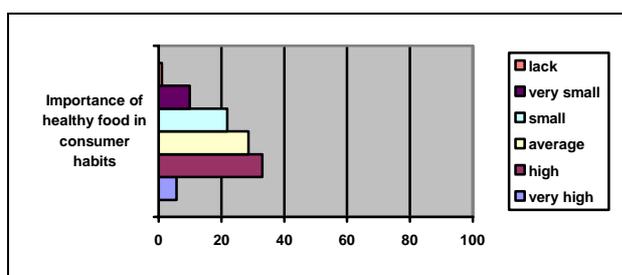


Figure 2. The importance of healthy food in the consumption habits of the consumers

The factors that could make the decision to purchase foods with health benefits are presented in Table 1.

It notes the high percentage of the health foods price than that of the conventional products price (29.87%), of the good information for consumers (21.56%) and their concern for the prevention of risks of disease (18.96%).

Out of the total of 22.08% of the respondents felt that buying food with health benefits is very necessary, 37.14% thought that is necessary, 33.51% that these foods have a low necessity, and 7.27% considered that the acquisition of these foods is not necessary.

Table 1. Elements that condition the decision to purchase food with health benefits

Element	Number of answers	Share in the total number of respondents (%)
Consumer better informed about the food benefits	83	21.56
Products more available	28	7.27
Concern regarding the effects of highly processed and additives foods	68	17.66
Personal concerns about risks of disease	73	18.96
Products availability at lower prices	115	29.87
Otherwise	18	4.68
TOTAL	385	100

In terms of frequency of purchase of food with health benefits 33.77% of the respondents said that they do this once a week, 32.47% more than once a week, and 22.86% more than once per month, 9.35% monthly and 1.56% rarely.

Regarding the decision to purchase and consume of foods with health benefits for 33.25% of the respondents there was an initial programming, to 57.66% was the result of an impulse and to 9.09% was due to the absence from shelves of conventional products.

Regarding share of foods with health benefits in diet, 61.82% of the respondents said that healthy foods are present in their diet at a rate below 25%, 31.43% consume healthy food in a proportion ranging 25 - 50%, while only 6.75% of the respondents said that eating foods with health benefits ratio exceeds 50%.

The main motivation for which the potential consumer does not buy foods with health benefits remains the price (30.13%), followed by the lack of any conditions to justify such use (17.92%), fear of side effects that these foods might have (16.10%) and preference for organic food (15.58%) (fig 3).

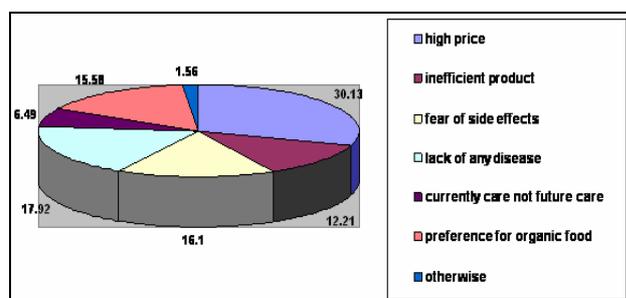


Figure 3. The main reason for not buy foods with health benefits

The variables that can attract the interest of consumers towards consumption of foods with health benefits are the particulars specified on the food label for 33.77% of the respondents, increased personal interest in the health through diet, for 28.31% of the respondents and respectively, promoting foods with health benefits for 28.05% of the respondents.

On consumers' favorite place where to find foods with health benefits 52.73% of the respondents opted to find these products on the shelves, along with other conventional products, 32.21% of respondents opted for an arrangement of special districts in the shops, while 15.06% of the respondents considered an appropriate arrangement of specialized shops in marketing these products.

Regarding the potential user opinions on what can be ensured, namely, that the food can support a good health body, views are divided fairly balanced (figure 4).

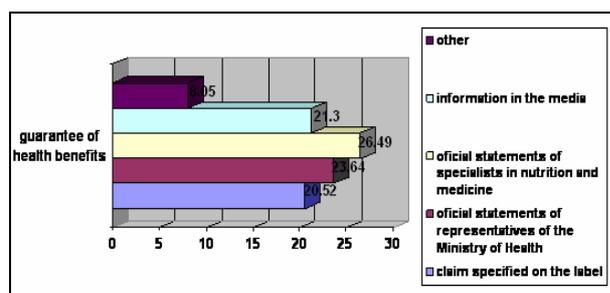


Figure 4. Elements to ensure the support of health benefits of foods

Out of the total of 74.29% of the respondents considered as important to authorize health claims on food by specialized bodies in the field, while 14.03% did not consider important this fact and 11.69% of the respondents did not acknowledge the need of authorization. Regarding the need for scientific evidence to support the health benefits of food 64.94% of the respondents considered that it is necessary, 9.87% of the respondents do not support this, 14.55% of the respondents believe that such evidence is not necessary, while 10.65% are not aware of the need for scientific support.

Most of the respondents (89.35%) considered as adequate the need of public communication of health benefits of foods, 6.79% of the respondents do not know and only 3.90% of the respondents considered that a public communication of the food benefits is not necessary. Views on the elements that should be communicated to the public about foods with health benefits were diversified (Table 2).

Table 3. Central bodies through the legislation adopted in foods with health benefits field provide

Element	Number of answers	Share in the total number of respondents (%)
A proper support and promote of foods with health benefits	35	9.09
Adequate protection of consumers of any producers fraudulent claims	67	17.40
Not aware	268	69.61
I disagree with the law on foods with health benefits	15	3.90
TOTAL	385	100

When asked if they are willing to pay more for a food with health benefits that meets the same needs as conventional foods, but does not fall within healthy products, 65.19% of the respondents answered negatively, while only 34.81% responded affirmatively.

Of the 134 respondents who said they can pay more to purchase a product with health benefits, 37.31% said that they could support a price 25% higher than the price of a conventional product, 43.28% were said that they may support a price by 26-49% higher than the price of a conventional product and only 19.40% said they may support a price of more than 50% higher than the price of a conventional product.

4. Conclusion

Today consumers want to know as much about the products they consume. They are becoming increasingly concerned about issues related to nutrition, health claims, food safety, food labeling, safety of food additives and ingredients used, and the effectiveness of inspection processes.

74.29% of the respondents considered important to authorize health claims for food by specialized bodies in the field. Thus, a hard task of research is needed to confirm the health benefits of each functional food or component of them. To transfer the potential benefits of functional foods on the health of the population, consumers must clearly understand this concept and have confidence in the scientific criteria used to support health claims. The scientific community continues to research the potential of functional food and their role in health insurance.

The availability of a clear framework for conducting scientific assessment of food is useful to all stakeholders. Consumers thus have to ensure that claims have been validated and that all claims are evaluated on the same criteria. Manufacturers and retailers who wish to seek such claims will know what evidence should be provided to substantiate them. Regulators thus have a clear understanding of the limits of validity of any claims.

The research results present the importance of communicating the food health benefits to the public, the vast majority of the respondents (89.35%) considering it necessary. Given that consumers are increasingly interested in the relationship between nutrition and functional food and the market is experiencing a dramatic development, the question of how to communicate the benefits arising from consumption of these foods is becoming increasingly important.

The simplest and most direct way in which consumers can learn more about functional foods is through product labeling, but labeling information must be easily understood and trusted. It is essential that these claims are based, and conducted on scientific information. The study presents the respondents' opinion on how to ensure the health benefits of foods, as follows: 20.52% by the present claims on the label or packaging of the product, 23.64% by official statements of representatives of the Ministry of Health, respectively, 26.49 % by official statements of specialists in nutrition and medicine.

The opportune and effective communication can help consumers worldwide obtain important information that has a positive impact on health and welfare.

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