

DESIGNER OPTION

21 omega 3 eggs a week

Cost: £299 a year**VS****NATURAL OPTION**

One salmon fillet a week

Cost: £162 a year

Which food is best for you?

59% of you buy foods with added ingredients that are claimed to boost general health or tackle health concerns. But with some adding hundreds of pounds to your shopping bills, are they really worth it?

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- understand what functional foods are
- decide whether they're good value for money
- find natural alternatives where available.

You may not know what 'functional foods' or 'designer foods' are but, in 2007, £613m was spent on them in the UK.

You're probably familiar with brands such as Yakult, Flora pro-active, and Danone Activia – but can you recall what they're supposed to do?

What do they do?

Functional foods contain added ingredients that offer health-promoting properties, and the market for these products is growing. 59% of Which? members we surveyed regularly buy them. But members are also sceptical about their health claims – 81% don't know whether to believe them or not. Some health benefits of functional foods

are well established, such as products with added calcium. As calcium is important for bone health, people who are lactose intolerant or have dairy allergies need other calcium sources.

Our research

With other functional foods, however, the benefits aren't so clear, so we decided to take a closer look at them.

We bought a selection of market-leading functional foods, examined their scientific evidence and asked Catherine Collins, chief dietitian at London's St George's Hospital, and Professor Glenn Gibson, a food microbiologist from Reading University, for their opinion on whether these products are worth buying. We also surveyed 2,503 Which?

members between 20 November and 4 December 2008 on their use and understanding of functional foods.

These products can be beneficial for certain people, but not all, and they may be unsuitable for those with certain conditions. Some have to be consumed in large amounts to be beneficial or they might work only for as long as they're taken, which can prove expensive.

To get any real benefit from the omega 3 in Heinz Baked Beans With Omega 3, for example, you'd need to consume six tins a day, which would cost a whopping £1,183 over a year. Compare that to the natural alternative of one salmon fillet a week, costing £1,021 less a year, and it's hard to see the point of such products. ►►



Plant sterols and stanols

What they claim to do

Taking 2-3g a day of plant sterols or stanols has been shown to lower cholesterol. High cholesterol – above five millimoles per litre (mmol/l) – can put you at risk of heart disease and stroke. Plant sterols and stanols occur naturally in fruits, vegetables, cereals and other plant foods in low amounts, but they're also added to products such as margarines, yoghurts and yoghurt drinks.

We typically consume around 0.4g of plant sterols and stanols a day from our diet so, to lower cholesterol, other sources – or medication and lifestyle changes – are needed.

Can they work?

Flora pro-active and Benecol's cholesterol-lowering health claims have been independently assessed by the European Food Safety Authority.

Research shows that these products can reduce LDL cholesterol levels by up to 15% but, as our case studies illustrate (see right), they're much more effective on some people with high cholesterol than others.

To see any benefit, you must consume 2-3g of plant sterols or stanols a day – equal to one yoghurt drink or 2-3 servings of spread, yoghurt or milk.

Also, the beneficial effect only lasts as long as you continue to regularly consume the products.

Who should take them?

These products are mainly beneficial to those with high cholesterol. You can use these products in combination with cholesterol-lowering drugs because they work differently, but do tell your GP.

If you have normal cholesterol levels there may be no point, particularly as they're more expensive than standard products.

And they shouldn't be used by pregnant or breastfeeding women or children under five.

Are there alternatives?

It is more important to limit foods high in saturated fat (see p5). Oats, beans, fruit and vegetables and soya can naturally lower cholesterol.



WHAT THEY COST

Flora pro-active and Benecol products

The cost depends on the combination you take, but products can be expensive

Daily cost

Yoghurt drink OR	55 to 59p
Two servings of spread OR	14p
A serving of spread and two yoghurts	£1.10

Product costs

Standard Flora spread 500g	£1.42
Flora pro-active spread 500g	£3.82
Benecol spread 500g	£3.68



ONLINE

Is it worth paying extra for diet foods?

Find out at

www.which.co.uk/dietfoods

Probiotics

WHAT THEY COST

Danone, Müller and Yakult products

Probiotic products can add to your annual shopping bill – and your calorie intake

Product/daily cost

Danone Activia	40p
Müller Vitality probiotic drink	32p
Yakult fermented milk drink	38p
Müller Vitality yoghurt	41p
Danone Actimel drink	33p

Annual cost

Drinking a probiotic drink every day for one year costs up to £139. Ask yourself whether you feel the health benefit is enough to justify the cost.

What they claim to do

Probiotics are 'good' bacteria that, it is claimed, benefit our digestive health, by improving the balance between good and bad bacteria in our colon.

Can they work?

Even experts disagree on how effective they are. Catherine Collins says: 'We already have a phenomenal number of bacteria in our colon that do a great job. If you're not suffering from constipation, diarrhoea, bloating or other digestive problems, there's no benefit in taking probiotics.'

However, Professor Gibson says that they can aid general health: 'Probiotics do have a preventative effect by strengthening the balance of bacteria to protect against digestive problems and boost immune function.'

To have any benefit, the probiotic must contain a sufficient number of the right bacteria. Certain bacteria



CAN THESE FOODS LOWER CHOLESTEROL?

Which? members' different experiences with Flora pro-activ

Jean Turner 68, Shop owner

In 2007, Jean's cholesterol was 6.6mmol/l and her GP prescribed statins, but she stopped taking them after suffering from side-effects including memory loss.

She says: 'I started Flora pro-activ yoghurt drinks after seeing

a TV advert, but I didn't make any other changes to my diet'.

Six months later, her cholesterol had dropped to 4.8mmol/l. Jean says: 'I couldn't believe it – it's fantastic, and I'm so relieved that I don't need to take statins anymore.'



'YES'

Alan Cole 66, retired

In 2006, Alan's cholesterol was 6.1mmol/l. His doctor advised a low-fat diet and Alan also started using Flora pro-activ spread. However, 11 months later his cholesterol had risen to 6.9mmol/l.

He complained to Flora, which told him that he hadn't been

taking enough of their products and, if he took more, he'd see a difference in three weeks. Alan started drinking the yoghurt as well, but two months later, his cholesterol was still 6.9mmol/l.

Alan says: 'I feel that the whole exercise was an expensive waste of time.'



'NO'



WHAT THEY COST

Flora, Goldenlay and Kingsmill products

The cost difference between standard and omega 3 products is minimal

Product cost

Flora Omega 3 plus £1.61	Flora spread £1.42
Goldenlay Omega 3 eggs £1.64	Standard free-range eggs £1.52
Kingsmill 50/50 Omega 3 £1.39	Kingsmill 50/50 £1.34

Omega 3

Since our 2007 report on omega 3 (*Which?* November 2007, p16), when we found confusing labelling, the number of products with added omega 3 has decreased.

What they claim to do

Omega 3 is an essential fatty acid that helps to keep our hearts healthy, and it's also important for babies during the development of their nervous systems.

Claims about improved concentration aren't yet proven.

And it's the type of omega 3 that matters.

Can they work?

Long-chain fatty acids derived from fish are those that matter – EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) are the most beneficial.

The short-chain fatty acid ALA (alpha-linolenic acid), found in plant sources, isn't proven to have the same benefits.

The omega 3 products we checked for this issue show that, even if they do contain EPA and DHA, you might need to consume unrealistic amounts to get the benefit – you'd need to eat six cans of Heinz Pirates of the Caribbean Pasta Shapes or 24 slices of Kingsmill 50/50 Omega 3 to get the recommended daily amount.

Are there alternatives?

Yes – fish. The government recommends that adults consume 0.45g a day or 2-3g a week of long-chain fatty acids, which is easily covered by eating two portions of fish a week, one of which should be oily, such as salmon and trout.

types are destroyed by gastric acid and even those that aren't – Bifidobacterium and Lactobacillus – need to number at least 10 million per dose.

But of the leading brands we looked at, only Yakult labels how many bacteria their product contains.

Who should take them?

Gastroenteritis and long-term use of antibiotics both cause more unhealthy bacteria to be present in the gut, so taking a probiotic can speed up a return of good bacteria and restore balance. Probiotics can also be beneficial for young children and older people when they have diarrhoea.

Are there alternatives?

After illness, a healthy balance of good bacteria will resume naturally. There are foods that you can eat to boost this, such as grains, pulses, fruit and vegetables.

Which? says

These foods can be useful, but they're not for everyone

Our research shows that functional foods can be useful for certain people, but they're not for everyone. And they aren't a substitute for a healthy, balanced diet.

Which? welcomes the European regulations on nutrition and health claims, and we're happy that health claims will have to be approved before being used in marketing so that consumers aren't misled.

However, there still needs to be better labelling, especially on some of the probiotic products we looked at which didn't specify the number of bacteria they contained.