

Nutrients and bioactives: claims and regulatory development in Asia

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Health claims are any representation on a food label that states, suggests or implies that a relationship exists between a food or a constituent of that food and health. The food industry can use these claims to convey messages on the health benefits of their products to the consumer. The consumer can gain insight into the health benefits of foods or specific nutrients and components through these claims. Health claims must of course be truthful and not misleading. There has thus been increased interest and efforts of regulatory agencies around the world to improve regulations on health claims. In the international arena, guidelines on nutrition and health claims established by Codex Alimentarius Codex in 1997 and revised a few years ago in 2004. Codex is currently deliberating on scientific substantiation of health claims.

In Asia, there has also been major regulatory developments in nutrition and health claims. Many countries in the region permit nutrition claims on food packages and some forms of health claims. Nutrition claims refer to nutrient content and comparative claims. Health claims include nutrient function claims, other function claims and reduction of disease risk claims. The nutrient function claims describe the physiological role of macronutrients, vitamins and minerals in growth, development and normal functions of the body. Other function claims describe specific beneficial effects of the consumption of a bioactive component in food in improving or modifying a physiological function. Disease risk reduction claims relate the consumption of a food or food bioactive component to the reduced risk of developing a disease or health related condition. It is to be noted that there is considerable interest in the role of food bioactive or functional components in promoting health.

This presentation reviews the nutrition and health claim status in five South East Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) as well as China and Japan. Nutrition claims are permitted in all the countries reviewed. All countries allow nutrient function claims. Other function claims are permitted in all countries, except in China and Thailand. The claims 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, namely Indonesia, Philippines and Japan, and only for a few nutrients or bioactive compounds.

There are considerable differences in the permitted nutrition and health claims in countries in the region. There are also differences in the regulatory framework for the approval of health claims. Nevertheless, all regulatory authorities require proper scientific substantiation of health claims. There will certainly be increased interest and activities in the region amongst consumers, food industry and regulatory agencies. Opportunities also exist for discussions and networking among countries in the region, eg through ILSI SEA Region series of workshop which commenced in 2001. In a recent workshop in August in Bangkok, regulators in the region exchanged experiences and recent developments in regulating nutrition labelling and nutrition and health claims and the substantiation of claims.

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