



# The Quest for Optimal Health: What You Need to Know About Functional Foods



## What are functional foods?

Functional foods are foods and food components that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition. Functional foods do more than just provide nutrients – they may play a role in reducing your risk of disease or in improving your health. These foods include health-promoting ingredients or natural components found in conventional foods, fortified, enriched or enhanced foods.

## What are some of the health benefits of consuming functional foods?

Nutritional research has shown that eating functional foods on a regular basis, as part of a balanced and varied diet, can enhance health and reduce the risk of many acute and chronic diseases.

### The top 10 reasons people choose functional foods are to:

Reduce risk of cardiovascular diseases	Reduce risk of other diseases
Reduce risk of cancer	Reduce osteoporosis
Weight loss/management	Improve mental health
Improve health in general	Improve reaction time
Improve memory	Improve fetal health

## What's the best way to incorporate functional foods into my diet?

The most effective way to reap the benefits of functional foods is to eat a balanced diet based on the five food groups. Then, include specific foods with beneficial components to meet your individual needs.

- Get into the habit of reading health claims and food labels on food products, and scanning articles on the connection between foods and health. Practice healthy skepticism, however (see “Can I believe what I read” section below).
- Consult with your health care provider before making any drastic changes in your diet, or if you have a particular health concern.
- Choose a variety of foods from each food group (milk, meats and beans, fruits, vegetables and grains) to incorporate many potentially beneficial components into your diet.
- Remember that there is no “magic bullet” that will guarantee health or cure or prevent all your health concerns.

## Can I believe what I read about the health benefits of functional foods?

It depends on the source. Be wary of reports about a single study that showed a benefit of eating a certain food. Don't change your diet based on a single scientific study! On the other hand, if an article summarizes a number of studies – and these studies took place in people, not in animals or in cell cultures – then the information is likely to be more balanced. When collecting information from television, radio, newspapers and the Internet, make sure that the source is credible. When in doubt, write your questions down and ask a dietitian or your health care provider whether the information is accurate, if it pertains to your specific needs, and whether you should act on it.

## Where can I find more information about the functional benefits of foods?

There are a number of credible sources of information on functional foods and their health benefits. Remember that success stories of friends and family do not mean that the same treatment will work for you. Listed below are a few websites you may want to check out to start collecting information:

[www.mealsmatter.org](http://www.mealsmatter.org)  
(Dairy Council of California)

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)  
(American Dietetic Association)

[www.ag.uiuc.edu/~ffh/](http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~ffh/)  
(Functional Foods for Health program by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Chicago)

[www.ific.org](http://www.ific.org)  
(International Food Information Council)



For questions or comments please contact  
[info@dairycouncilofca.org](mailto:info@dairycouncilofca.org)

## Where can I find functional foods?

Many functional foods can be found in your grocery store... and you may even have some of them in your refrigerator and pantry! Remember that to reap the benefits of functional foods they need to be consumed in appropriate amounts. Your health care provider can help you establish realistic and maintainable goals for both foods and activity to help you achieve your goals. The chart below lists some functional foods, their health benefits and active components.\*

Food Source	Health Benefit(s)	Active component(s)
Almonds	May lower LDL and total cholesterol May reduce risk of heart disease	Monounsaturated fatty acids, protein, fiber, vitamin E, magnesium
Blueberries	May reduce risk of cancer May improve vision problems May prevent urinary tract infection	Antioxidants such as anthocyanin, fiber
Broccoli	May lower LDL cholesterol May reduce risk of cancer May maintain healthy immune system	Vitamins A, K, C, E; beta-carotene, potassium, folate, fiber, sulforaphane, glucosinolates
Cheese	May decrease risk of certain cancers	Calcium, vitamins A, D; protein, riboflavin, phosphorus, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA)
Chocolate, Dark	May decrease risk of heart disease	Flavonoids, potassium, iron, phosphorus, monounsaturated fatty acids, and stearic acid
Cranberries	May improve urinary tract health May reduce risk of acute and recurrent urinary tract infection May reduce risk of heart disease	Fructose and proanthocyanidins
Flax Seed	May reduce risk of heart disease May decrease high blood pressure May reduce osteoporosis risk May decrease total cholesterol and LDL	Omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin E, fiber, beta-carotene, magnesium, potassium, lignans
Garlic	May reduce risk of cancer May lower total cholesterol levels May lower blood pressure May protect against common cold	Antioxidants, potassium, phosphorus
Grapes and Grape Juice (Red and Purple)	May reduce risk of heart disease May inhibit tumor growth May prevent cell damage	Phytonutrients, polyphenols, vitamin C
Milk	May reduce risk of osteoporosis May decrease colon cancer risk May reduce high blood pressure	Calcium, vitamins A, D; protein, riboflavin, phosphorus, potassium
Oatmeal	May reduce total and LDL cholesterol levels	Beta-glucan (soluble fiber), protein, B-vitamins
Salmon	May improve mental and visual function May reduce risk of heart disease	Omega-3 fatty acids, protein, potassium, vitamins D, E; phosphorus
Soy	May reduce risk of heart disease May decrease risk of certain cancers in some people May lower LDL cholesterol May ease menopausal symptoms	Omega-3 fatty acids, protein, potassium, vitamins D, E; phosphorus
Tea	Black: May decrease heart disease risk May reduce risk of some cancers Green: May reduce risk for heart disease May boost immune system	Vitamin C, tannins, catechins, flavonoids, theaflavin-3'-monogallate (TF-2) Polyphenols
Tomatoes	May reduce risk of prostate cancer May decrease heart attack risk	Lycopene (an antioxidant), vitamins A, C; potassium, beta-carotene, phosphorus
Whey Protein	May reduce the risk of cancer May strengthen immune system May improve exercise performance May increase muscle mass on resistance training program	Lactoferrin, lactoperoxidase, alpha-lactalbumin, sphingomyelin and calcium
Wine, Red	May reduce heart disease risk May decrease risk of some cancers May reduce LDL cholesterol May raise HDL cholesterol	Flavonoids, phenols (an antioxidant), resveratrol
Yogurt, cultured dairy products	Some strains may improve intestinal health May reduce risk of some cancers May reduce cholesterol in some groups	Calcium, vitamins A, D; protein, riboflavin, phosphorus, probiotics

\*For a more comprehensive list of functional foods and recipe suggestions go to the "Eating for Health" section of [www.mealsmatter.org/](http://www.mealsmatter.org/)