

# The New Miracle Foods

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**The hottest new items in supermarkets are making amazing claims. But do they really work — and are they safe? GHRI investigates.**

It can be hard to tell if you're at the grocery store or the pharmacy these days. More and more food products tout medical benefits that go way beyond basic nutrition. Called "functional foods," they contain specific ingredients that have been added to promote good health. But do they? You won't always be able to tell from the label. The Food and Drug Administration is considering new regulations for functional foods, but for now, here's what you need to know about the most popular items on shelves.

## For Energy

Last year, close to 200 energy-boosting drinks were introduced in the United States, with sales increasing by more than 50 percent in 2006 alone, report marketing firms. These drinks were once pitched primarily to extreme-sport athletes and young clubgoers, but some have now gone mainstream and are being marketed to — you guessed it — tired moms.

**On the shelves:** Tab Energy, Arizona Green Tea Energy Drink, Red Bull Energy Drink, Glacéau Vitamin-water Energy, SoBe Adrenaline Rush, Naked All Natural Energy 100% Juice Smoothie, and the just-released (and provocatively named) Cocaine Energy Drink.

**Claims:** "To keep you on your feet, not on your face," promises the Naked Energy juice. Generally, these products claim they'll get you going, improve concentration, and increase endurance, among other things.

**Evidence:** Many of the drinks are laced with caffeine or the caffeine-containing herb guarana. An 8.4-ounce can of Cocaine, for example, contains 280 milligrams of caffeine — about three times the amount in a cup of home-brewed coffee (which has about 95 mg). Caffeine is an effective stimulant; numerous studies have shown that when people take it at lower doses (20 to 200 mg), they report feeling more energetic, efficient, and alert. Some of the drinks also contain add-ins like ginseng, the amino acid taurine, and B complex vitamins, but there's little evidence that these offer any benefit.

**Shopping advice:** An energy drink may help you through an afternoon slump. But keep your daily caffeine total under 300 mg.

**Watch out for:** Too much caffeine, which can increase your heart rate and blood pressure, especially if you suffer from anxiety or hypertension. If taken too close to bedtime, caffeine can also keep you from falling asleep — and sleep has been proven to boost energy. Calories may be a problem too: Some products are so high in sugar, they may weigh you down more than pick you up. SoBe Adrenaline Rush, for example, has 260 calories and 66 grams of sugar (that's 16 teaspoons!). At that rate, you could have a brownie instead.

## For Your Waistline

Negative calories? That's the boast of one new drink promising enhanced calorie burning in a tasty beverage. The other magic word on new diet products is *satiety*, which means the item will (supposedly) make you feel satisfied sooner and keep you feeling full longer, so you'll eat less. Calorie burners and satiety enhancers are so hot, they're two of the top 10 food and beverage trends for 2007, says marketing research firm Datamonitor.

## The Calorie Burners

**On the shelves:** Enviga (Coca-Cola and Nestlé's new green tea sparkling beverage), Celsius, Fuze Healthy Infusions Slenderize, Jana Skinny Water, JavaFit Diet Plus Gourmet Coffee.

**Claims:** "The great taste of burning calories!" "Lose weight-gain energy" are a couple of the slogans you'll see in advertisements or on labels. Some of the products also promise to curb appetite, boost your metabolism, and burn fat.

**Evidence:** The key ingredient in many of these beverages is green tea extract, caffeine, or, often, a combination of the two. Short-term studies have shown that these ingredients can give your metabolism a small boost (by about 3.5 percent in one study of the combo) and burn an average of 78 calories. But researchers writing in a 2006 issue of *Obesity Reviews* say that additional studies are needed to determine whether the products actually help you lose over a long period. What's more, metabolism changes in a controlled experiment don't necessarily translate to weight loss in the real world.

Some products include ingredients that you often find in over-the-counter weight-loss supplements, including Citrus aurantium, chromium picolinate, or Garcinia cambogia. Reviewing the value of these ingredients in a recent article in *Obesity Management*, George Bray, M.D., of the Pennington Biomedical Research Center, concluded there was little to no evidence that they make it easier to drop pounds.

**Shopping advice:** These products are calorie free (or virtually so). If you have a sugary-soda habit, switching to any diet drink can help you lose. Just don't count on the "calorie-burning" additives in these new drinks to make a huge difference: Even the Coca-Cola Company's own research showed that drinking three cans of Enviga a day burned, on average, only an extra 60 to 100 calories, which can be wiped out if you swipe just a forkful of your husband's dessert. (Still, 100 calories a day could add up over time, if you keep your fork to yourself.)

**Watch out for:** Citrus aurantium (sometimes listed as *bitter orange* or *Seville orange*) if you have high blood pressure or other cardiovascular problems. It can raise blood pressure and also interact with medications used to treat these disorders, say researchers from Georgetown University Medical Center. Combining Citrus aurantium with caffeine may magnify the risks.

## Satiety Builders

**On the shelves:** Dannon Light & Fit Crave Control yogurt; Lightfull Satiety Smoothie; Quaker Weight Control instant oatmeal; Slim-Fast Optima shakes; Special K20 Protein water, snack, and meal-replacement bars.

**Claims:** Helps satisfy hunger, "surprisingly filling," controls hunger longer.

**Evidence:** All these foods contain added protein and/or fiber. Research has shown that eating more protein can quell hunger and cut food intake. In a study at the University of Washington School of Medicine, a group of subjects doubled the amount of protein in their diet and spontaneously ate about 441 fewer calories a day, losing, on average, almost 11 pounds in 12 weeks. And numerous studies over the last two decades have linked diets high in fiber with lower body weights. But in these studies, people's eating habits were completely transformed. Just adding a bit of fiber and protein to your yogurt "isn't going to help you lose weight," cautions Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., a satiety expert and nutrition professor at Penn State University. Slim-Fast Optima shakes work in a different way: These meal-replacement drinks have been reformulated so that fat digestion is delayed, which stimulates the release of hormones that send fullness signals to your brain. Early studies suggest that this new technology does work.

**Shopping advice:** As snacks, these fiber- and protein-enriched products are clearly better choices than cookies or chips. And if you find meal-replacement products useful, Slim-Fast Optima shakes may help get around the "hungry again in an hour" problem.

**Watch out for:** Exaggerated promises. Ordinary fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats probably control hunger just as well.

## For Your Tummy

Supermarkets are now brimming with new kinds of yogurt, as well as drinks and cereals, that contain health-promoting bacteria or yeast called probiotics. Long popular in Europe, probiotics are just starting to take off here.

**On the shelves:** Dannon Activia, Dannon DanActive Immunity, Lifeway Kefir, Kashi Vive Probiotic Digestive Wellness Cereal, Stonyfield Farm yogurt/smoothies, GT's Organic Raw Kombucha tea.

**Claims:** Digestive balance, digestive regularity, immune system support, healthier skin and hair, decreased appetite, prevention of vaginal infections, cholesterol lowering, cancer protection.

**Evidence:** Microbiologists agree that the potential benefits of probiotics are enormous, but as a group of experts reported at an international conference a little over a year ago, consumers usually have no way of knowing what they're getting in the new products. "There are many different strains of probiotics, but only a few have been studied and shown to have a distinct benefit," says Mary Ellen Sanders, Ph.D., executive director of the International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics. "Also," she adds, "products are often labeled inadequately. They may not tell you the strain of probiotic or the levels present through the end of a product's shelf life."

Nonetheless, there's definite promise. Several studies have shown that Dannon's Activia speeds intestinal transit time — the hours it takes food to pass through your digestive system — which may help if you have a problem with constipation.

Companies also claim that probiotics boost immunity. In one study, people who ate DanActive had shorter-lasting colds. Other research, in Sweden, showed that a certain strain of bacteria cut the number of sick days that employees took. But that study, like most others with probiotics, was conducted with supplements, not with commercially available foods, which don't contain enough of the strain in question.

There is also strong evidence supporting claims that three strains of probiotics — *Bifidobacterium lactis*, *Saccharomyces boulardii*, and *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG — relieve or prevent diarrhea. But again, you won't find enough of these microbes in any supermarket foods; you'd need to buy probiotic supplements such as Florastor (which contains *Saccharomyces boulardii*) or Culturelle (*Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG) in a health food store.

**Shopping advice:** If your goal is to just get some potentially beneficial bacteria into your diet, use products that contain *Bifidobacteria* and *Lactobacilli*. But you can hedge your bets still further by choosing items that would be good for you even if they didn't tout probiotics. Kashi's Vive Probiotic cereal is high in fiber. The yogurt, smoothies, and kefir drinks from Dannon, Stonyfield Farm, and Lifeway all deliver calcium and protein. Stonyfield and Lifeway also include inulin, a naturally occurring fiber that boosts your body's absorption of calcium, report several studies.

**Watch out for:** Promises of weight loss, improved liver function, healthy skin, or cancer-fighting properties — there's no substantial research to back up these claims.

## For Your Heart

First there was oat bran, added to everything from cereal to potato chips. Now there are tons of enhanced foods promising to promote cardiovascular health (even such unlikely candidates as eggs and mayonnaise). With thousands of baby boomers turning 50 every day, food companies are seeing, well, a boom market here.

### Products containing plant sterols or stanols

**On the shelves:** These natural plant substances are added to Benecol and Take Control spreads; Minute Maid Premium Heartwise Orange Juice; Nature Valley Healthy Heart Chewy Granola bars; Corazonas tortilla chips; Right Direction cookies (which also contain four grams of heart-healthy soluble fiber).

**Claims:** Foods that contain plant sterols (and follow government guidelines for sodium, fat, and other ingredients) can boast an FDA-approved claim, such as "lowers cholesterol" or "may reduce the risk of heart disease."

**Evidence:** Extensive research shows that both plant sterols and stanols, as well as soluble fiber (such as oat bran), can lower elevated LDL cholesterol by about 10 percent.

**Shopping advice:** Choose products that are also low in saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol. Keep in mind that these foods, which can be pricier than their non-enhanced counterparts, help only if you already have high cholesterol. Also, plant sterols must be eaten twice a day and at separate meals — you can't just slather your morning toast with Benecol and be done with it if you want to reap the heart benefit.

**Watch out for:** Calories! One chocolate chip cookie fortified with plant sterols has the same 150 or so calories as an ordinary chocolate chip cookie. It makes sense to use these products only if they are substitutes for less healthy versions.

### Products containing omega-3s

**On the shelves:** Odwalla Soymilk; Omega Farms Omega-3-fortified dairy products (including milk, cheese, and yogurt); omega-3-fortified eggs; and many other enhanced foods, from bread to mayonnaise.

**Claims:** Most of these products haven't gotten the FDA stamp of approval, so manufacturers need to tread more carefully. You're likely to see vague promises like "helps maintain a healthy heart" or "promotes healthy circulation."

**Evidence:** Most or all of the omega-3s in these enhanced products is in the plant form (called ALA), which is healthy — but doesn't have any proven heart benefits. To get those benefits, you need the type of omega-3s that are found in fatty fish (EPA/DHA). True, a few fortified products do contain EPA/DHA, but they don't supply enough to make much difference.

**Shopping advice:** Go fishing. The American Heart Association recommends that everyone eat at least two servings of fish (particularly a fatty type like salmon or lake trout) weekly. A 3-ounce serving of salmon averages 1,450 mg of EPA/DHA, compared to only 75 mg in an 8-ounce serving of Omega Farms Milk.

### Products containing antioxidants

**On the shelves:** Kashi Heart to Heart Cereal; Quaker Take Heart Instant Oatmeal, and a large variety of other foods and beverages. Usually, these are flagged contains antioxidants on the label.

**Claims:** Again, companies must be careful; you're likely to see general promises of a healthier heart.

**Evidence:** Recently, a very large analysis from the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, the National Institutes of Health, and other research centers concluded that antioxidants do not in fact reduce the risk of heart disease (though there are other good reasons to include them in your diet).

**Shopping advice:** If you're swapping an enriched bar or cereal for a sausage, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwich, you'll be doing your heart a favor, even if the antioxidants don't directly help.

— *Additional reporting by Willow Jarosh, M.S., R.D.*

<http://www.webmd.com/diet/features/new-miracle-foods>

