
NUTRITION AND HEALTH FOODS

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In this workshop there was agreement on the statement that 'health' as adjective before 'food' does not have a sound nutritional meaning. As Dr. Herbert stated it: 'health food' means the same as the term 'food'. Health is a specious adjective designed to deceive the public to believe a food so promoted has special health properties. All food is health food in moderation; any food is unhealthy in excess. Actually some foods sold as health foods may be very unhealthy indeed. However, the term 'health food' is known by consumers as foods which are mainly plant foods, 'organically' grown, mainly unprocessed, sold in health food stores, sometimes with therapeutic potentials and mostly rather expensive. The question arises who are the users. Dr. Oltersdorf (FRG) studied the health food users in the Federal Republic of Germany by mailing questionnaires to 'Reformhäuser' (traditional health food stores) and to 'Bioläden' (recently established health food stores).

The customers (680 from Reformhäuser and 630 from Bioläden) reported to use health foods, mainly because of health aspects and ecological concern. The customers of these shops differ in several aspects from the general population in the Federal Republic of Germany, that is more than 60% is vegetarian, they are well educated and do have less overweight problems. The customers of the Bioläden are young (63% is aged 18-30 years) and slim (according to their self reported weight 85% is below Broca normal weight).

Dr. Prättälä (Finland) studied the characteristics of health food users by mailing a questionnaire to 2,012 randomly selected Finns aged 20-70 years. 81% (1,635) completed and returned the questionnaire. Health foods were regularly used by 20% of the participants and 24% had some experience with health foods. As the major reasons for using health foods were mentioned: general health care (59%), improvement of bowel function (42%), experimentation (40%), improvement of nutrient content of food (34%), and better physical fitness (29%).

Also in Finland health food users differ from non-users with respect to education (higher for users), social background, and age (users are mainly young adults).

Yield per acre, and the nutritional value of plant foods grown conventionally (with synthetic fertilizers) and organically is of great interest for health food users. Dr. Lairon (France) presented a study in which conventionally (with synthetic fertilizers) and organically grown vegetables (leeks and carrots) were compared. The results of this study show that comparable yields can be obtained in the two ways of growing vegetables. The dry matter content of organically grown vegetables is equivalent or significantly higher than the conventionally grown vegetables. The mineral content (P, K, Ca, Mg, Fe, Cu, Mn) did not show great differences, except that in some cases the iron content in organically grown vegetables was much higher. The

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most striking result was the difference in the nitrate content, being significantly lower in organically grown vegetables than in conventionally grown vegetables. This latter result was considered as a positive aspect of organically grown plant foods. In the discussion the question arose on the necessity of using synthetic fertilizers containing less nitrogen.

For nutritionists it is important to know the consequences for health (the nutritional status) in using health foods. To answer this question it is important to distinguish different groups of users. Dr. Bruce (Sweden) presented a review of various users, distinguished on the basis of their background and diet. Many health food users are vegetarians and if their diet is sufficiently varied and balanced no nutritional problem will exist. However, there are some extremists eating very monotonous diets, who might be at risk for a deficiency on one or more nutrients. A group considered to be at risk is a group using a so-called Zen-macrobiotic diet. Dr. Knuijan (the Netherlands) presented results from a study among macrobiotics. This study was carried out within the framework of a number of investigations on the relationship between food consumption and serum lipids. The risk profile for coronary heart disease of the macrobiotics as determined by the concentration of total cholesterol, the ratio of HDL cholesterol/total cholesterol, and the blood pressure appeared to be favourable. There were no clinical symptoms which indicate the presence of deficiencies although the concentration of vitamin B₁₂ in serum was generally low. However, the most vulnerable groups using these diets are groups needing a diet with a relatively high nutrient density for example the very young children. Studies in this special field are needed.

The discussion had made it clear that much nonsense can be heard with regard to health foods. It was also stressed however, that there are different groups of health food users. Some of these groups do have a sound nutritional knowledge and do have the same questions as the so-called 'non-users'. The way some groups solve their problems can be very helpful and deserves respect.

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORKSHOP AND RELATED POSTERS

USE OF HEALTH FOODS IN FINLAND

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The prevalence of the use of health foods (foods sold in health food stores) in Finland and some characteristics of health food users were studied by mailing a questionnaire to 2,012 randomly selected Finns aged 20-70 years. The questionnaire was completed and returned by 1,635 persons (81%).

Health foods were regularly used by 29% of the participants, and 24% had some

experience with health foods or had visited a health food store. Regular use of health foods was most common among young or middle-aged women who were well educated, unmarried and lived in cities. Those using health foods were prone to negative attitudes towards processed food and the medical profession. They emphasized the health effects of food by using food as medicine. The use of health foods was also associated with so-called alternative methods of treatment. As the major reasons for using health foods, the participants considered general health care (59%), improvement of the bowel function (42%), experimentation