

# No 'one size fits all' for health claims

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Health claims and symbols on food products could have a positive impact on public health. But there's no clear view yet on what works best.

Health claims and symbols on [food products](#) could improve [public health](#). At least, that is according to consumer researchers. But how they can best do that as effectively as possible is still a mystery. The EU-funded project CLYMBOL hopes to have the answer by the time it is completed in 2016. Sophie Hieke, head of the department of consumer research at EUFIC, the European Food Information Council in Brussels, who is also the project coordinator talks to CommNet about how best to understand

the response of consumers to health claims.

## **What attracted you to focus on health claims?**

We are looking at health claims and symbols because we see this type of information as aids to help consumers identify foods that are healthier options. We want to shed some light on how consumers interpret this type of information.

## **But how will these health claims help the consumers?**

When you enter a supermarket many products contain health claims. And it is up to you whether you use that information. Often, we use it unconsciously or without being aware of it influencing our decisions. What was initially considered marketing information is now being regulated because it does have a substantial effect on consumer choices. And we, as researchers, believe it's important to better understand what that effect is. Only then, will we be able to derive meaningful recommendations.

## **So health claims and symbols can indeed improve public health?**

But we do believe there is a potential to support and improve public health. But at the moment we do not know yet. We do not have sufficient data to understand what works best. What we also see is that it is almost never enough to just have the information on the packaging. The real challenge is to combine information provided in the packaging with other methods of communication and also education.

## **How many different health claims and symbols are there in Europe approximately?**

Currently, this is difficult to tell. A first list of 222 approved health claims has been published by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) last year and subsequently approved by the European Commission. Now, manufacturers are required to only put the approved health claims on their packaging. But a lot of products are already in the market. And they either carry different claims or do not carry the claims yet. It will take time before all products in Europe can comply with this first list of approved claims. This process will be repeated in the future, as there are many more claim dossiers that have been submitted to EFSA for approval. We are in a transition phase.

## **Are the claims and symbols generally understood by the consumers?**

Our research project was called into life to answer this exact question. There has been a lot of fragmented research in the past decades comparing one or two countries, or one or two health claims. But none of these studies has had the sheer size and scope of our EU-wide project. We will be able to undertake this research across multiple countries, with a number of renowned academics in this field. We will also be able to look at many more and different claims and symbols all over Europe.

## **Do you have any idea yet what a 'good' health claim or symbol should look like?**

Generally, there is no such thing as one size fits all. People are different. Situations are different... Mood has an effect, appetite, the presence of children... Nationality and level of education can play a role... It is a bit like the search for a golden middle path; the right level of simplicity, something that is easily understood while still offering enough relevant information. All of these aspects are combined to help and guide us toward healthier choices.

## Will your findings be put into practice?

It is a project that attracts a lot of attention, mainly due to it being a sensitive topic for all the stakeholders. We will develop guidelines for EU policy directed at health claims and symbols. And we will publish a set of methods for policy makers, industry and consumer organisations to help them assess the effect of [health claims](#) and symbols.

**More information:** [www.clymbol.eu/](http://www.clymbol.eu/)

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