

FOOD SUPPLEMENTS

Food supplements are concentrated sources of nutrients or other substances with a nutritional or physiological effect, whose purpose is to supplement the normal diet. Food supplements are marketed 'in dose' form, for example as pills, tablets, capsules or liquids in measured doses etc. Supplements may be used to correct nutritional deficiencies or maintain an adequate intake of certain nutrients. However, in some cases excessive intake of vitamins and minerals may be harmful or may cause unwanted side effects; therefore, maximum levels are necessary to ensure their safe use in food supplements.

The European Commission has established harmonised rules to help ensure that food supplements are safe and properly labelled. In the EU, food supplements are regulated as foods and the legislation focuses on vitamins and minerals used as ingredients of food supplements.

The main EU legislation is Directive 2002/46/EC related to food supplements containing vitamins and minerals.

The Directive sets out labelling requirements and requires that EU-wide maximum and minimum levels are set for each vitamin and mineral added to supplements. As excessive intake of vitamins and minerals may result in adverse effects, the Directive provides for the setting of maximum amounts of vitamins and minerals added to food supplements. This task has been delegated to the Commission and is currently ongoing.

In addition, its Annex II contains a list of permitted vitamin or mineral substances that may be added for specific nutritional purposes in food supplements. Annex II has been amended by Regulation 1170/2009 of 30 November 2009.

Vitamin and mineral substances may be considered for inclusion in the lists following the evaluation of an appropriate scientific dossier concerning the safety and bioavailability of the individual substance by EFSA. Companies wishing to market a substance not included in the permitted list need to submit an application to the European Commission.

NUTRITION AND HEALTH CLAIMS

A health claim is any statement used on labels, in marketing or in advertising that health benefits can result from consuming a given food or from one of its components such as vitamins and minerals, fibre, and 'probiotic' bacteria. There are different types of health claims. For instance, statements that a food can help reinforce the body's natural defences or enhance learning ability are called "general function" claims. Examples also include claims on the reduction of disease risk and other substances that may improve or modify the normal functions of the body, e.g. "Plant sterol have shown to reduce cholesterol levels, a risk factor in the development of coronary heart disease" or "Calcium may help improve bone density".

A nutrition claim states or suggests that a food has particular beneficial nutritional properties. Examples include "low fat", "source of omega-3 fatty acids" or "high in fibre".

The Regulation on Nutrition and Health Claims on Foods requires that foods bearing nutrition and health claim must meet certain nutritional requirements or so-called "nutrient profiles." Foods need to comply with these conditions in order to be eligible to make such claims. The profiles will help ensure that consumers who utilise claims to guide healthy diet choices, and who may perceive foods bearing claims as having a nutritional or health advantage, are not misled as to their overall nutritional value.