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Health claims for food unnecessarily confusing

More and more of the foods and dietary supplements appearing in our shops come with statements - claims - that give the impression that the products are "healthy", or "healthier". This impression is not always correct. The present rules for health claims leave room for confusion. The Health Council of the Netherlands recommends to prohibit vague claims. This is one of the recommendations in an advisory report that the Council has today presented to the Minister of Health, Welfare & Sport and the Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management & Fisheries.

Existing rules on claims are confusing because, while a manufacturer is allowed to say that use of a food or dietary supplement helps to maintain or promote health, nothing can be said to suggest that it can contribute to disease prevention. Claiming that a product is preventive of disease is a medical claim, and such a claim may only be made for medicines. Despite this legal distinction, the Council sees no practical or scientific difference between "the maintenance of health" and "the prevention of disease". Furthermore, it has been proposed previously that reduction of disease risk is essentially different from disease prevention; the Council does not see such a distinction either. The only type of claims that should be used with foods and dietary supplements are specific, explicit and evidentially based claims on disease risk reduction.

The publication "Foods and dietary supplements with health claims" (no. 2003/09E) can be downloaded from www.healthcouncil.nl. Hard copies are available from the Secretariat of the Health Council, telephone +31 70 340 7686, fax +31 70 340 7523, e-mail order@gr.nl. It is also available in Dutch. Enquiries regarding the subject matter may be addressed to dr LTJ Pijls, telephone +31 70 340 6012, e-mail loek.pijls@gr.nl.

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- Professor AW Hoes, clinical epidemiologist, University Medical Centre, Utrecht
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