

Spread Your Way to Lower Cholesterol!

Evidence that plant sterols and stanols reduce cholesterol leads to official approval of a new health claim on food labels.

You may be spreading these heart-healthy plant compounds on your toast already. Vegetable oil spreads that contain plant sterols and stanols may help reduce blood cholesterol levels when consumed in a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol and now, food manufacturers are officially allowed to say so on their labels.

Foods that contain plant sterols or stanols can now be labeled with a health claim about their relationship in reducing risk of heart disease. This officially approved health claim is the 12th of its kind relating a specific nutrient or substances in foods to a disease or health condition.

Last September, the Food and Drug Administration officially authorized the labeling of health claims on foods that contain plant sterols or plant stanol esters and their role in reducing the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD). CHD is the #1 cause of death in the U.S. This health claim was authorized after demonstrating with significant scientific evidence that they may lower blood cholesterol levels – an important risk factor for CHD.

Authorized under the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, 12 health claims to-date have been approved based on sound scientific evidence about the relationship between a nutrient or food ingredient and a disease or health-related condition.

Plant sterols are present in small amounts in plant foods like many fruits, vegetables, nuts, cereals and other sources. Plant stanols are present in some of the same sources in even smaller amounts. Both are found in vegetable oils.

Vegetable oil-spreads (similar in character to margarine or butter) and dressings with approved levels of *plant sterols* are eligible to carry the health claim, as are spreads, dressings, snack bars and gel dietary supplements with *plant stanol esters*. Foods that are labeled with the relationship between plant sterols and stanols in reducing cholesterol levels and risk of CHD must also meet the requirements of being low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

The FDA requires, as with other approved health claims associated with reduced risk of CHD, that the label clearly state that the plant sterol and plant stanol esters should be consumed *as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol*.

To qualify for the health claim, a food item must contain a minimum of 0.65 grams of plant sterol esters or 1.7 grams of plant stanol esters per serving. The

health claim must also indicate that 2 *servings* should be consumed at different times with other food each day. These are the amounts per day – 1.3 and 3.4 grams, respectively - that have been shown in studies to significantly lower cholesterol levels.

Several products are currently on the market including some vegetable oil spreads that carry the health claim. An food label carrying the approved health claim may state: “*Helps promote healthy cholesterol levels as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol.*”

This new health claim is the latest in demonstrating the relationship of food nutrients to health and disease approved for food labels.

References:

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