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# Many health-food claims struggle with scientific rigor

BY MATTHEW DALTON

BRUSSELS—European scientific authorities Thursday rejected dozens of health claims made by food companies, in a sign of how tricky it will be for them to get some of their most popular claims past a European Union drive to bring scientific rigor to the health foods.

A panel of the European Food Safety Authority issued nearly a hundred opinions on health claims, about two-thirds of which were negative. The rejections included claims on special bacteria that are supposed to aid digestion and boost the immune system beta carotene additives for sunscreen and shark cartilage for healthy joints.

The panel rejected two-thirds of the claims, and half of these were rejected because the substance in question wasn't adequately described, the EFSA said in a statement. The claims that were accepted related mainly to vitamins and minerals known to promote health, dietary fiber, fatty acids for lowering cholesterol and sugar-free gum that is good for the teeth.

EU governments agreed more than two years ago to submit health claims to scientific scrutiny, with the goal of producing a list of allowed claims for products sold anywhere in the EU. The panel's opinions now will be reviewed by the European Commission, the EU's executive branch, and officials from the EU national governments before coming into force.

The reviews will be particularly important for Danone SA, since the appeal of two of its major yogurt brands, Activia and Actimel, are founded on the company's claims that strains of bacteria help digestion (Activia) and boost the immune system (Actimel).

The EFSA panel took a dim view of some bacteria supplements—known as probiotics—in the opinions released Thursday, though none of the opinions were on health claims specifically used by Danone or Nestlé SA, which also sells products with bacteria supplements. A Danone spokesman declined to comment. A spokeswoman from Nestlé said the company is reviewing the EFSA panel's opinions and wouldn't comment further.

In one opinion, the panel said the data provided weren't compelling enough to justify the claim that the bacteria *Lactobacillus casei* F19 improves bowel functioning. The

panel also rejected claims that several other bacteria reduce levels of harmful intestinal organisms.

Danone has previously fought criticism of the claims it makes on its probiotics products. Two weeks ago, the French firm's U.S. unit agreed to change its marketing practices and reimburse customers \$35 million for its probiotic products to settle a class-action lawsuit.

The opinions released Thursday by the European panel were mainly in response to claims submitted by EU national governments and not by specific companies, which have submitted their own applications to use health claims

Beta-carotene added to sunscreen wasn't shown to maintain the skin's immune response under exposure to ultraviolet rays, the panel said. Nor did shark cartilage help the joints: The panel said the studies presented didn't demonstrate an effect and also that the actual composition of the shark cartilage wasn't adequately described.

—William Horobin  
contributed to this article.



EU reviews of health claims will be particularly important for Danone, which claims that strains of bacteria in its Activia yogurt help digestion.

