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Consumers need simple, concise messages about benefits of phytonutrients

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An expert panel at the Institute of Food Technologists' Wellness 12 meeting urged the food industry to find simple yet powerful language to tell consumers about the many benefits of a diet rich in phytonutrients.

Phytonutrients are plant-based components that are thought to promote health, such as beta carotene and lycopene. They are typically found in fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and teas.

During Wednesday's discussion, the panelists noted that phytonutrients are very complex, and care must be taken when promoting their benefits to avoid the image of a "magic bullet." At the same time, consumers can grow weary of constantly changing nutritional recommendations, causing them to feel overwhelmed and possibly decide to forgo healthy eating altogether.

The solution is for the scientific community to agree on appropriate messages and then present those simply and consistently to consumers, said panelist Connie Diekman, M.Ed., RD, LD, FADA, director of university nutrition at Washington University in St. Louis.

"It has to be easy for consumers to make this part of what they do in their diet," Diekman said. "When we question each other, the consumer really gets confused and thinks, 'If scientists can't agree, where does that leave me?'"

For example, Diekman noted that dark chocolate contains phytonutrients

that can be very beneficial for health. However, the message to consumers must stress that these benefits are limited to dark chocolate – not milk chocolate – and that eating too much of any kind of chocolate can lead to serious health conditions such as obesity.

Diekman suggested promoting "strongly flavored, darkly colored" foods, and taking care to highlight the importance of phytonutrients as part of the whole food. Consumers should be encouraged to choose healthy plant-based foods because of how all the ingredients combine to produce health benefits.

Provided by Institute of Food Science & Technology

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