

How does soy labeling influence preference and taste?

Background

Does putting “soy” on a label influence what people think and taste? Yes, people have a genuine perception of soy--they don’t think they like its taste, but they do believe it is healthy for them.

When people eat a food that has soy on the label, such as an energy bar, most will think it tastes bad even if it doesn’t contain any soy at all.

People’s tastes are subjective and can be influenced by many things, particularly what is written on the package or on the label of the food product.

We are all influenced by a food product’s label, one way or another. It can be a positive influence (“contains chocolate, honey, whole milk”) or negative (“contains soy fats”) even if we cannot taste it.

Key Teaching Points

- ❑ We taste what we think we will taste
- ❑ If we think something is going to taste good, our taste buds cooperate. If we think it is going to taste bad, they’ll cooperate in that direction too

Student Demonstration

Before the session, cut an energy bar into small pieces, enough so each student can have two pieces each. Display an equal number of pieces on two plates or trays. Label the first plate “regular energy bar” and the second “soy energy bar.”

At the beginning of this session have the students take out a piece of paper and a pencil. Present the students with the two plates or trays labeled. Ask them to take one sample from each plate. Before they taste it, ask them to write down their opinion about each sample.

Now, tell them to taste each sample and to write down their comments about the taste of each bar. Next, ask them to answer the following questions for each sample:

- ❑ *How good is it on a scale of 1 to 10?*
(1 = bad; 10 = very good)
- ❑ *How healthy do you think it is on a scale of 1 to 10?*
(1 = not healthy; 10 = very healthy)
- ❑ *Do you really believe there is soy in it?*

Discuss their answers and talk about the health benefit of soy briefly.

Now, you can tell them that, in fact, both samples are identical and none of them contain soy. Ask them their reactions and allow them to taste each sample again. Now you can discuss how the soy label influenced their taste and their perception of the healthy food.

From Wansink, Brian and Se-Bum Park (2002), “Sensory Suggestiveness and Labeling: Do Soy Labels Bias Taste?” Journal of Sensory Studies, 17:5 (November), 483-491.

