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Application of Functional Foods in Body Weight Health Management

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Abstract. As overweight and obesity have become a common public health concern worldwide, how to achieve reasonable and effective weight control has also attracted the attention of the whole society. As an effective dietary intervention, functional foods can assist in regulating human body weight through various pathways, and their pivotal role in weight control is worthy of in-depth exploration. This paper reviews the main mechanisms by which functional foods regulate body weight, including the regulation of food intake and satiety, the regulation of glucose and lipid metabolism, the regulation of intestinal microorganisms and intestinal environment, and the improvement of chronic low-grade inflammation and oxidative stress. It also introduces the application progress of different types of functional foods, such as dietary fiber, prebiotics and probiotics, plant functional factors, proteins and active peptides. In addition, the current problems in this field are summarized, including inconsistent levels of scientific evidence, disconnection between mechanism research and clinical practice, gaps between product claims and actual effects, and individual differences. Meanwhile, future development trends are proposed, shifting from single-component to multi-component products, from general weight loss to personalized nutrition, from weight loss to health-oriented management, and from product development to a dual-track system of standardization and science popularization. In summary, this paper systematically introduces the functional mechanisms, application types, existing problems and development trends of functional foods in weight loss, which can provide certain references for future research and product development.

Keywords: functional foods, body weight health management, mechanism of action

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous development of economy and society, the steady improvement of residents' living standards, and profound changes in lifestyle and dietary structure, the nutritional and health problems of Chinese residents have gradually shifted from past malnutrition to a new stage characterized by excessive energy intake, unbalanced nutritional structure and insufficient physical activity. Against this background, the prevalence of overweight and obesity continues to rise, and they have gradually become important risk factors inducing a variety of chronic non-communicable diseases [1, 2]. Studies have shown [2-4] that abnormal body weight is closely related to the risk of cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, metabolic syndrome and

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various cancers, which further increases individual health damage and social medical burden. Figure 1 shows the changes in mortality rates of four major chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among people under 70 years old in China from 2010 to 2021, which reflects the severe situation of chronic disease prevention and control at a macro level. It also indicates that body weight health management is no longer merely a matter of physical appearance, but an important issue related to chronic disease prevention, the extension of healthy life expectancy and the construction of public health systems.

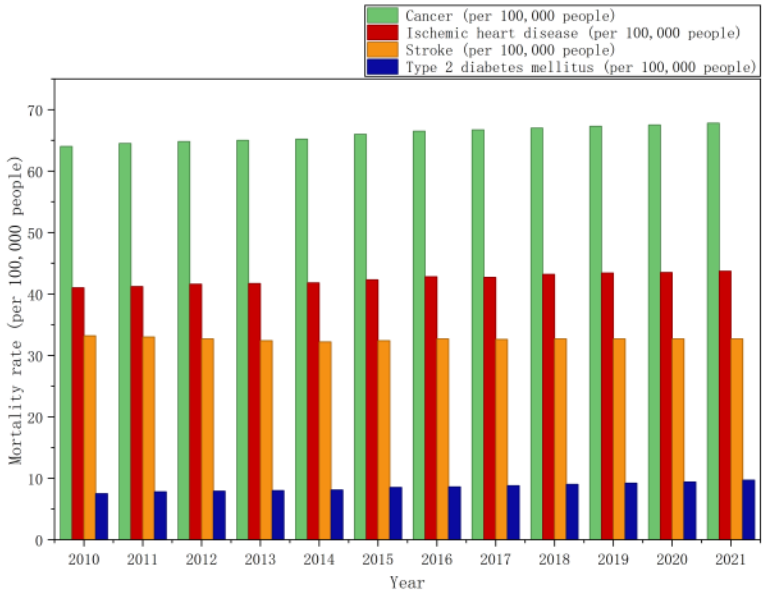

Figure 1. Changes in mortality rates of four major chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among people under 70 years old in China from 2010 to 2021

At present, weight management mainly relies on dietary control, exercise intervention, behavioral and routine adjustment, and pharmacological treatment when necessary. Although these methods achieve certain effects in the short term, they still have limitations in long-term compliance, individual adaptability, metabolic adaptation and safety [5]. In contrast, functional foods have gradually become an important supplementary approach in the field of body weight health management due to their characteristics of nutritional supply, health regulation and daily accessibility. Functional foods generally refer to foods that, on the basis of providing basic nutrition, regulate human satiety, intestinal flora, lipid metabolism, energy metabolism and inflammatory response through functional factors such as dietary fiber, high-quality protein, active peptides, probiotics, prebiotics and plant active ingredients [6]. With the promotion of the "Weight Management Year" campaign and the improvement of public health awareness, products with low calories, high fiber content, rich in high-quality protein, probiotics or medicinal and edible ingredients have gradually been integrated into people's daily diets, providing a milder, more convenient and sustainable intervention approach for weight management.

At present, certain progress has been made in the research on the application of functional foods in body weight health management, but their development still faces various problems. On the one hand, the mechanisms of some functional ingredients have not been fully clarified. Existing studies vary greatly in experimental design, intervention dosage, intervention duration and target population [7-10], and the synergistic or antagonistic effects among different ingredients need further verification. On the other hand, the market still faces problems such as imperfect regulatory

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standards, uneven product quality, vague boundaries of efficacy promotion and insufficient consumer awareness, which are likely to cause misunderstandings or excessive expectations [11]. Based on the above, this paper discusses functional foods and body weight health management, focusing on the analysis of their main mechanisms of action, typical application types, practical problems and future development directions, so as to provide references for relevant research, product research and development and health management practice.

2. Mechanisms of action

Healthy body weight is not merely simple weight management, but a health concept with energy balance, body composition and metabolic status as its basic connotations. It refers to a state where excessive fat accumulation is avoided on the basis of ensuring a relative balance between energy intake and energy expenditure, thereby preventing adverse consequences caused by being overweight or underweight [12, 13]. Traditional body weight assessment mostly uses Body Mass Index (BMI). The WHO generally regards an adult BMI of 18.5–24.9 kg/m² as standard body weight, and a BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m² as overweight. However, with the development of health management concepts, a single BMI can no longer fully reflect a person's true health status. Waist circumference, body fat percentage, muscle mass, fat distribution and metabolic indicators are increasingly used as supplementary means to evaluate weight health [14]. Therefore, weight health is a multidimensional and dynamic complex, and its formation and maintenance are the result of the combined effects of multiple factors, including dietary structure, physical activity, daily routine, intestinal flora, genetic background and metabolic level.

The role of functional foods in weight management is not targeted at a single target, but involves multiple functional factors that exert auxiliary regulatory effects on energy intake, nutrient absorption, glucose and lipid metabolism, intestinal flora and inflammatory response. First, functional factors such as high protein and high dietary fiber can increase satiety and thus reduce total calorie intake by prolonging gastric emptying, extending the time of chyme swallowing, increasing the viscosity of gastrointestinal contents and stimulating the secretion of satiety hormones [15-18]. For example, whey protein can stimulate the secretion of satiety signals such as cholecystokinin (CCK) and glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1), prolonging the duration of satiety [19]; dietary fiber can form a gel structure in the gastrointestinal tract, slow down the speed of digestion and absorption, and reduce postprandial energy intake to a certain extent. Second, plant active ingredients such as polyphenols, polysaccharides and alkaloids can participate in the regulation of lipid metabolism and glucose metabolism [20-22]. On the one hand, they improve the body's energy utilization efficiency by promoting fatty acid oxidation, improving mitochondrial function and enhancing insulin sensitivity; on the other hand, they reduce fat accumulation by inhibiting the activity of enzymes related to fat synthesis and the process of adipocyte differentiation.

In addition, intestinal microecology is also one of the important targets for functional foods to participate in weight management. Probiotics, prebiotics and some fermentable dietary fibers can regulate the body's energy expenditure and fat absorption by affecting the balance of intestinal flora, maintaining the integrity of intestinal mucosa and enhancing the production of short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) and other beneficial substances. Studies have shown that intestinal microbiota disorders are often associated with obesity, insulin resistance and chronic low-grade inflammation, and functional foods can help with weight management from the perspective of microecology by improving the intestinal metabolic environment [23-25]. Furthermore, obesity is often accompanied by chronic low-grade inflammation in adipose tissue, increased oxidative stress and immune

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metabolic disorders [26, 27]. Sustained elevation of inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-1β (IL-1β) and tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF-α) will aggravate insulin resistance and metabolic disorders. Functional active substances such as curcumin, polyphenols and flavonoids have certain antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. They can regulate the obesity-related metabolic microenvironment by eliminating oxygen free radicals, inhibiting the levels of inflammatory cytokines and maintaining redox balance [22, 28].

In summary, functional foods have the advantages of mild intervention, high accessibility in daily life, good public recognition and suitability for chronic lifestyle management in weight management. They are not advocated as tools for alternative treatment or rapid weight loss, but can serve as an effective supplementary approach for optimizing dietary nutrients and intervening in healthy lifestyles. They provide help in enhancing satiety, promoting the balance of glucose and lipid metabolism, maintaining the stability of intestinal flora and reducing inflammatory and oxidative damage to the body. Of course, it should also be emphasized that functional foods cannot replace comprehensive dietary management, physical exercise and clinical treatment, and are not suitable for promotion with exaggerated weight loss effects. For people who are overweight, obese or already have metabolic diseases, functional foods should be incorporated into a comprehensive weight management plan on the basis of scientific evaluation to better exert their health promotion value.

3. Main types and application status of functional foods

Functional foods are used in a wide variety of forms in body weight health management, among which dietary fiber, prebiotics and probiotics, plant active ingredients, proteins and active peptides represent major product categories. Dietary fiber is widely used in meal replacement powders, cereal bars, fermented beverages, high-fiber snacks and other products due to its functions of promoting intestinal peristalsis, enhancing satiety, regulating postprandial blood glucose and improving lipid metabolism. According to solubility, dietary fiber can be divided into soluble and insoluble types. The former includes pectin, konjac glucomannan, fructooligosaccharides and so on, which can form a gel structure in the gastrointestinal tract to delay gastric emptying and glucose absorption. The latter, such as cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin, is mainly derived from cereal bran, coarse grains, fruits and vegetables. It can increase fecal volume, promote intestinal peristalsis, and relieve constipation, a common problem during weight management [29]. Similar to dietary fiber, prebiotics and probiotics also participate in weight management mainly by regulating intestinal microecology. Prebiotics such as galactooligosaccharides, isomaltooligosaccharides and inulin can selectively promote the growth of beneficial intestinal bacteria [23, 24]. Representative probiotics include lactic acid bacteria, Lactobacillus acidophilus, Bifidobacterium and others, which exert effects by improving flora structure, regulating lipid absorption and alleviating obesity-related metabolic disorders [24, 25]. At present, such products are mainly concentrated in fermented dairy products, probiotic freeze-dried powders, solid beverages and compound meal replacement products, making them a highly concerned category in the weight health management market.

Plant active ingredients and protein-based ingredients function more through metabolic regulation and nutritional supplementation. Plant active ingredients mainly refer to key secondary metabolites in plants, including polyphenols, flavonoids, alkaloids, polysaccharides, saponins, volatile oils and others. Tea polyphenols, wolfberry polysaccharides, ganoderma lucidum polysaccharides, and extracts from bitter melon, white kidney bean and other plants are widely used in weight management foods. Among them, tea polyphenols can reduce fat accumulation by affecting fat synthesis and oxidation [30], plant polysaccharides participate in the regulation of

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glucose and lipid metabolism and improve satiety [31], and white kidney bean extract is often used in products designed to reduce the digestion and absorption of starch [7]. Owing to their natural sources and high consumer acceptance, these raw materials are often developed into herbal teas, compressed tablets, energy bars and compound solid beverages. Representative products of proteins and active peptides include milk protein, soy protein, whey protein, whey peptides, soy peptides and collagen peptides. They can enhance satiety, maintain muscle mass, reduce lean body mass loss during fat reduction and support basal metabolism, so they are widely used in protein powders, protein bars, meal replacement shakes, sports drinks and high-protein dairy products. Especially for people pursuing fat loss and body shaping, high-protein, low-calorie and portable products better meet their needs for daily nutritional supplementation and weight management.

At present, the application of functional foods in weight management is characterized by multi-component combinations, portability and product homogeneity. Multi-component combination means that manufacturers often use a variety of raw materials such as dietary fiber, protein powder, prebiotics and enzymes to achieve synergistic effects including enhanced satiety, boosted metabolism, intestinal regulation and nutritional supplementation, compensating for the defects of single raw materials in absorption efficiency, taste and flavor, processing stability and functional pathways. On the other hand, product forms have expanded from traditional health foods to meal replacements, snacks, beverages, instant powders and ready-to-eat foods, better satisfying weight management needs among young people and in fast-paced lifestyles. However, problems such as homogeneous functional claims, high formula similarity, low core technological content and insufficient efficacy verification still exist. Excessive products focus on similar slogans such as "fat reduction", "slimming", "sugar control" and "satiety", which easily cause cognitive confusion among consumers [11]. In the future, the application of functional foods in body weight health management should attach more importance to the scientificity of raw materials, synergistic formulation, product palatability and clinical evidence support, so as to drive the industry to shift from conceptual marketing to precision, scientization and standardization.

4. Practical problems and development directions of functional foods

Guided by the concept of great health in recent years, more and more people have recognized the value of functional foods in weight management and regarded them as one of the effective supplementary approaches for dietary management and behavioral intervention. At present, the functional food industry in China is developing rapidly with an increasing variety of products and diversified functional applications. However, it still faces problems such as weak basic research, unclear orientation of efficacy mechanisms and clinical application, excessive marketing and weak pertinence. At present, many studies on weight-loss functional foods mostly stay at the stage of in vitro experiments and animal experiments, while clinical studies on humans are rare. Moreover, the intervention dosage, intervention duration, population characteristics and evaluation indicators in these studies are different, resulting in the results of different reports unable to be compared and popularized, which is not conducive to the formation of a stable and reliable evidence chain [7-10]. Secondly, existing studies mostly focus on the action targets and metabolic pathways of functional ingredients, but these mechanistic achievements cannot be directly transformed into product schemes in line with public dietary structure, exercise habits and consumption scenarios, leading to a certain gap between theoretical research and practical weight management needs [32].

In terms of market application, some products have problems such as vague functional claims, exaggerated efficacy promotion and unclear marketing boundaries. They often highlight concepts such as "fat reduction", "slimming" and "quick effects", but weaken the applicable conditions and

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limitations of functional foods as auxiliary intervention measures, which easily cause misunderstanding among consumers and even affect the credibility of the industry [11]. At the same time, body weight health management itself has significant individual differences. Human body weight is jointly affected by many factors such as genetic background, dietary habits, daily routine, exercise level, intestinal flora and metabolic status, and different populations may have obvious differences in response to the same functional food. Therefore, if the model of single product, unified dosage and generalized promotion is still adopted, it is difficult to meet the actual needs of people with different obesity types and different health conditions, and it is not conducive to the scientific application of functional foods in body weight health management.

In the future, the development of functional foods in the field of body weight health management should gradually shift from single-component development to the combination of compound formulas and precise nutrition. On the one hand, research should be strengthened on the synergistic effects, dosage relationships and long-term safety among multiple active ingredients, and the scientific compounding of raw materials such as dietary fiber, high-quality protein, probiotics and plant active ingredients should be promoted, so as to improve the comprehensive intervention effects of products in satiety regulation, glucose and lipid metabolism improvement, intestinal microecology maintenance and inflammation control. On the other hand, it is necessary to classify populations according to their obesity degree, age and gender, metabolic indicators, dietary habits and intestinal flora characteristics, and transform weight management from the extensive management model of "one product for all" to individualization and precision; and expand from simple weight reduction to comprehensive evaluation of body fat percentage, waist circumference, blood glucose, blood lipid, intestinal homeostasis, muscle mass and systemic metabolic health. In addition, the relevant standards and supervision systems of functional foods should be further improved, product efficacy claims and market promotion should be standardized, scientific communication should be strengthened, consumers should be guided to rationally recognize the auxiliary role of functional foods, and the industry should be promoted to develop in the direction of sufficient evidence, reliable products, standardized communication and scientific application.

5. Conclusions

Healthy body weight is determined by multiple factors including dietary nutrition, lifestyle, intestinal microecology, genetic inheritance and metabolic function. Its core goal is not limited to simple weight reduction, but focuses on the optimization of body composition and metabolic level. As effective auxiliary intervention tools, functional foods can enhance satiety, control total energy intake, regulate glucose and lipid metabolism, maintain intestinal flora balance and alleviate chronic low-grade inflammation, so as to assist scientific weight management. At present, functional foods represented by dietary fiber, prebiotics and probiotics, plant active ingredients, proteins and active peptides have become mainstream research and application directions, and have been widely applied in meal replacements, beverages, leisure foods and functional nutritional products.

It is necessary to clarify that functional foods cannot replace regular diet, physical exercise and clinical drug treatment, and only serve as an auxiliary part of the prevention and control system for obesity and related chronic diseases. Currently, the industry still has many deficiencies, including low evidence-based medical level, insufficient clinical trials, unclear effective dosage, serious product homogenization and exaggerated efficacy claims. In future research and development of functional foods, more attention should be paid to evidence-based medicine research, personalized nutrition design, multi-component synergistic mechanisms and targeted population application. On the premise of ensuring product safety and efficacy, consumer acceptability should be fully

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considered. This will promote the transformation of weight-loss functional foods from simple fat reduction tools to scientific, sustainable and health-oriented nutritional products.

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