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The berry with punch

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By Terri Coles

TORONTO (Reuters) - All hail the [acai](#), the latest of a variety of trendy fruits that are finding their way into drinks like smoothies, teas and juices, along with the promise of giving your health a boost.

A few years ago, pomegranate was suddenly everywhere, but new options like [goji](#) berries and [mangosteen](#) became popular once the bright red seed-filled fruit went mainstream.

Now the buzz fruit is [acai](#), pronounced "a-sigh-ee". It's the latest trend in an increasingly popular food category: [functional foods](#), defined as those that provide some benefit outside of basic nutrition. A dark purple Brazilian berry promoted as packed with fiber, phytochemicals and essential fatty acids, acai has been called "nature's perfect energy fruit" by well-known [nutritionist Dr. Nicholas Perricone](#).

"The acai berry is one of the most nutritious and powerful foods in the world," said Jeff Graham, managing director of product development for [MonaVie](#), makers of two juice beverages that contain acai berries, along with eighteen other fruits.

Acai does have an impressive nutritional profile: it's high in healthy fats like omega fatty acids and phytochemicals like antioxidants, and low in sodium, cholesterol and natural sugars. It also contains soluble and insoluble fiber, and essential amino acids.

But while the research on acai is promising, it's also new, which means that consumers need to be wary of overblown health claims and deceptive marketing, said Dr. Joshua Bomser, a nutrition professor at [Ohio State University](#). Even if unsupported claims are not associated with a particular product, they can easily be found online, and it can be difficult for consumers to tell which sources are reputable and which are not.

A [University of Florida study](#) showed that extracts from acai berries killed leukemia cells in a laboratory setting, and the research is often mentioned by proponents of the berry and its health benefits.

Dr. Andrew Weil, a leading expert in integrative medicine, [writes](#) that there's a big scientific leap from what happens in a test tube to what happens in the human body, and past studies have shown that results seen in a lab don't always bear out in human trials.

Consumers with a layman's understanding of the science may not understand that difference, Bomser pointed out, especially if it's presented in a misleading way. "Consumers really need to be aware of where the information is coming from."

MonaVie's acai-based juices are marketed as a food, which restricts the claims that can be made about their health benefits, but some manufacturers of similar high-concentration juices market them as dietary supplements. Foods sold in the United States are subject to FDA regulations controlling marketing claims that can be made in their advertising and on their packaging, while dietary supplements go virtually unregulated.

MonaVie works from the top down to market its juices accurately and legally, Graham said. The products are sold by individuals through multilevel or network marketing instead of in stores, and sellers who make false claims are removed from the company's distribution list, he said.

