



# An ounce of prevention

Products promoting immune system support are gaining traction

**F**ood and beverage products featuring functional ingredients that provide immune system support are becoming more prevalent in the marketplace. In 2009, 144 food and beverage products introduced in North America featured a “functional-immune system” claim, a significant increase compared to 2006 when only 9 products were introduced, according to Mintel International Ltd., Chicago.

The years in between 2006 and 2009 saw several events take place to heighten interest in products featuring immune system support claims. In 2007, The Dannon Co., White Plains, N.Y., a division of Groupe Danone, Paris, introduced DanActive nationwide in the United States. DanActive is a dairy-based beverage containing the culture *L. casei* Immunitas. The culture is believed to have a positive effect on the balance of intestinal bacteria, according to The Dannon Co. A balanced intestinal microflora acts as a barrier against colonization of harmful bacteria, which may provide support to the body's immune system.

Also in 2007, Biothera, Eagan, Minn., introduced its Wellmune WGP ingredient at the Institute

of Food Technologists Annual Meeting and Food Expo in Chicago. During the show the company was awarded the 2007 I.F.T. Food Expo Innovation Award.

The new ingredient and news of the I.F.T. award heightened interest in the ingredient, said David Walsh, vice-president of communications, but progress in getting new products to market featuring the ingredient was slow as product developers familiarized themselves with the ingredient and its properties.

In 2008, interest in food and beverage products that supported the immune system was heightened as concern about a global pandemic due to the H1N1 virus grew. Interest in products has continued into 2010, according to Mintel International. As of May 17, 2010, 51 food and beverage products have been introduced featuring a functional-immune system claim.

“We find that the market for products that support the

immune system have a loyal following, however, it is a relatively small market when compared to products that can help the digestive system,” said Michael Neuwirth, senior director of public relations for The Dannon Co. “This is in part due to the relative complexity of the immune system, which is a bit more difficult for the average person to understand than the digestive system.”

Mr. Walsh echoed Mr. Neuwirth's comments, noting that unlike other products featuring functional ingredients, the challenge of selling a product that supports the immune system is there is no direct feeling of a benefit.

“You can't feel it working,” he said. “I liken it to buying an insurance policy. You may not know it's working, but you understand the benefits it offers.”

As consumers become more sophisticated in their understanding of the relationship

between diet and health, Mr. Walsh said there will be a greater demand for products that support the immune system. Currently, women between the ages of 25 to 65 are the primary target market for products featuring an immunity benefit.

Another challenge facing food manufacturers is to develop food and beverage products that are consumed daily. Like other functional ingredients, daily consumption is the key to receiving the product's full benefit.

DanActive is sold in 3.1-oz bottles that may be consumed as part of a meal or as a snack. Recently introduced products featuring Wellmune WGP include Praeventia cookies from Groupe Biscuits Leclerc, Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures, Quebec. The products are a line extension and available in two varieties: ginger and dark chocolate chip. MonaVie, Salt Lake City, a maker of acai-based juice beverages has introduced (M)mun that features the Biothera ingredient.

As with any functional product, scientific support of the benefit is necessary. In November 2009, the Kellogg Co., Battle Creek, Mich., announced it was discontinuing the immunity statements on its Rice Krispies



cereals. The cereal had featured a banner on the front of each box with the words "Now helps support your child's immunity." The company's decision to discontinue the claim came after a San Francisco attorney sent a letter to the company requesting information on the validity of the research behind the claim.

This month, research funded by The Danmoo Co. and published in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, found DanActive reduced the rate of

common sicknesses such as ear infections, sinusitis, diarrhea and the flu in daycare children. The study showed no reduction in the number of school days missed by the children, though.

"We were interested in a study that resembled how children in the U.S. consume drinks that are stored in home refrigerators and consumed without study personnel observation," said Daniel Merenstein, M.D., director of research in the department of family medicine at the Georgetown

University School of Medicine.

The study, titled "Decreasing the rates of illness in kids," was a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study. It included 638 healthy children ages three to six who attended school five days a week. Parents were asked to give their child a daily yogurt-like drink. Some were supplemented with *L. casei* and others had no probiotics.

The researchers found a 19% decrease of common infections among the children who drank the yogurt-like drink with *L. casei* compared to those whose drink did not have the probiotics. In addition, those who drank the yogurt-like beverage had 24% fewer gastrointestinal infections, and 18% fewer upper respiratory tract infections.

"Our study had mixed results," Mr. Merenstein said. "Children in school or daycare are especially susceptible to these illnesses. We did find some differences in infection

rates but this did not translate to fewer missed school days or change in daily activity."

In late April, Biothera said new data presented at the conference Experimental Biology 2010 in Anaheim, Calif., showed the Wellmune WGP ingredient may reduce upper respiratory tract infection symptoms. In a study of 122 volunteers, participants taking 250 mg of Wellmune WGP daily for 12 weeks reported a 58% reduction in upper respiratory tract infection symptoms, compared with individuals taking a placebo.

"As we have seen in previous peer-reviewed, published studies, Wellmune WGP can naturally enhance immune responses during periods of high stress," said Don Cox, Ph.D., Biothera vice-president of research and development. "Maintaining a healthy immune system is critical to maintaining overall health and vitality." ■■

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