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## Digestive Health Offers Both a Concern and an Opportunity

While consumer interpretations and needs vary, gut health is becoming mainstream.

By Pan Demetrakakes, Senior Editor

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Probiotics. Prebiotics. Natural and added fiber. Gluten. Fermentation. When it comes to gut health, consumers have a lot to ... digest.

Digestive health means various things to different consumers at different times: avoidance of bloating, pain and discomfort; regular, consistent bowel movements; minimal to no gastric reflux, and timely gastric emptying. While digestive health may not be the uppermost nutritional concern for a majority of consumers, food industry observers say it's becoming increasingly important.

"Digestive health is in a really interesting place right now, because at one point in time it was kind of niche," says Shelley Balanko, senior vice president with the Hartman Group ([www.hartman-group.com](http://www.hartman-group.com)). "Only really progressive consumers in the wellness space were actively managing their digestion and seeking products that would improve it.

"Now it's become a much more mainstream concern," she continued. "However, what it means and how it's being addressed really varies along a continuum among health and wellness consumers more generally."

Balanko says this continuum extends from "accidental tourists" of health and wellness, who don't really think about their digestion until something goes wrong, to "core consumers," who take an active role in health management, are always trying to educate themselves and follow trends quickly.

One of the most enduring such trends has been gluten-free products. The market for gluten-free has grown an average of 24 percent a year from 2013 to 2017, according to Innova Market Insights ([www.innovadatabase.com](http://www.innovadatabase.com)). This is somewhat surprising because gluten, a protein that occurs naturally in wheat, rye and barley, is truly problematic only for sufferers of celiac disease—an intestinal disorder that afflicts about 1 percent of the U.S. population.

Balanko, however, says that gluten-free has a wider appeal, "because it's connected with general digestive discomfort, and for many consumers, gluten-free was a path to weight management."

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In that regard, it was effective for some consumers for the same simple reason that the low-carb diet helped people lose weight: It led them to limit their overall calorie consumption.

“It’s always heartbreaking to tell them that they are losing weight because they are being more conscious of what they are consuming, thus consuming [fewer] overall calories, and that no, it is likely not just being gluten-free,” says Kristi King, a senior pediatric dietitian at Texas Children’s Hospital and a clinical instructor at Baylor College of Medicine.

King says she always cautions those who go gluten-free without a medical reason. “Many times, that means people will cut grains completely out of their diets, which reduces their fiber intake as well as many vitamins and minerals,” she says.

## Fiber and the gut

Fiber, in grain-based foods and many others, has been associated with digestive health for decades. In 2014, the Whole Grains Council ([wholegrainscouncil.org](http://wholegrainscouncil.org)), a nonprofit advocacy group, issued its Whole Grain Stamps — certifying three degrees of whole-grain content — to 9,442 products. At last count, the number is up to 12,439.

“Digestive health is certainly one of the more popular advantages of whole grains, especially because whole grains are so closely linked with fiber in consumers’ minds,” says Kelly Toups, the council’s director of nutrition. According to a survey this year by the International Food Information Council ([www.foodinsight.org](http://www.foodinsight.org)), more than 80 percent of respondents recognize whole grains as healthy, and survey data from NPD Group ([www.npdgroup.com](http://www.npdgroup.com)) found that 52 percent of consumers say they’re seeking out more whole grains.

Some nutritionists and consumer advocates are skeptical of the value of fiber that is added to a formulation, for example in the form of inulin, a substance usually derived from chicory root. But others estimate that 5 percent or less of Americans get enough natural fiber to make up the recommended daily allowance of 25-28g per day, and that adding to the total by any means is a good thing.

Chelsey Keeler, a food scientist at General Mills ([www.generalmills.com](http://www.generalmills.com)), echoes that sentiment, saying the company’s Fiber One energy bars help consumers by boosting their fiber intake. “Fiber One products are a way of ‘making treats count,’ or choosing snacks that provide more than just calories to help nudge nutrient intakes towards the goals we all strive to achieve,” Keeler says.

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