
WELLNESS

Food Makers Following More Than Gut Instincts On Digestive Health

Retailers respond to consumers' surging interest in digestive health-related products and foods By [Kathleen Furore](#) on Mar. 05, 2019

About three years ago, the folks at Enjoy Life Foods approached CVS Pharmacy with an idea: merchandise and market products that promote gut health. The idea didn't fly.

"We were too early," says [Joel Warady](#), GM and chief sales and marketing officer for Chicago-based [Enjoy Life Foods](#).

That was then—this is now.

"What we've seen in the last 12 months is that retail interest in gut health is really growing rapidly," Warady said. "Wegmans is promoting gut health in special diet sections and several retailers—Albertsons and Safeway, for example—are testing the concept via their online sites. They want to see if there's enough interest to call gut health out in-store."

Others are, too. [Publix Super Markets](#)' website offers in-depth information about topics such as prebiotics and probiotics and encourages visitors to sign up for informational and educational emails about health and wellness topics, including gut health. Also, The Kroger Co. recently named digestive wellness the [No. 1 trend for 2019](#). And what about CVS? "Some of its stores now have 4-foot sections labeled 'Gut Health,'" Warady said.

Health Concerns at the Forefront

Clearly, gut health is becoming a big issue with today's consumers.

"A cultural shift from a focus on heart health to the gut has begun," according to Syndicated Research Highlights: 2018 Year in Review & What's Ahead in 2019 from The Hartman Group. "Much of consumers' current thinking about health revolves around digestion and health of the microbiome as the root of wellness and choosing foods and beverages that help their bodies absorb nutrients most efficiently."

The fact that consumers are beginning to understand that our diets profoundly affect our health is driving this burgeoning interest in the gut-health movement, industry experts say.

“There have been a lot of well-respected studies over the past several years that indicate that gut health plays an important role in overall health,” said J.C. Hanley, co-founder and COO of San Francisco-based [Forager Project](#). “As with most trends, the insights from those studies have really started to make their way into mainstream consciousness, and people are more and more aware of the connection between food and overall wellness.”

And then there’s the fact that many people are plagued by digestive health problems.

“It’s estimated that over 60 million Americans suffer from GI [gastrointestinal] distress,” said Derek Miller, VP of communications for Lifeway Foods in Morton Grove, Ill. “Adding to that, there’s exciting research that shows how our gut health affects our mental health via the gut-brain axis. So while convenient—but unhealthy—foods have been prevalent in the U.S. for a long time, the tradeoff of digestive and mental health issues caused by the abundance of processed foods just isn’t working out. “Adding probiotics, prebiotic fiber and plenty of water into your diet can help support a healthy gut, which in turn can have benefits that affect your whole body,” he continued. “In addition to your digestion, your skin, muscles and mental health are all supported by a good balance of gut bacteria.”

An emphasis on personalization is another factor fueling the category, according to John Quilter, VP and general manager of Wellmune and Ganeden for Kerry, a global company whose North American Technology and Innovation Center is in Beloit, Wis. There is “a recognition of the importance of individual needs and preferences and, in turn, the satisfaction of these with tailored solutions,” Quilter said.

“Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the field of nutrition,” he said. “In fact, research indicates that 71% of consumers globally find the concept of products customized to their individual health needs to be very or somewhat appealing. ... Digestive health is one of those areas where consumers are looking for targeted nutritional support and is a top desired benefit in food and drink products among consumers.”

Quackery’ No More

For as much press as gut health has generated, Warady of Enjoy Life Foods said the concept remains a relatively new one in the U.S. marketplace—at least from the perspective of the average consumer.

“Our target consumer community has been talking about gut health for years and using the term ‘leaky gut’ for a decade—it was almost seen as quackery,” Warady says. “But now people understand that ‘leaky gut’ leads to autoimmune diseases and other digestive issues, [so] it totally makes sense. With average consumers, it’s still very early, but they’re starting to understand that what happens to our gut affects our whole being.”

And that means now is the time for retailers to seriously consider how they’ll make their mark in the gut-health arena—especially considering its upside potential. According to [Technavio](#)’s Global Probiotics Market 2017-2021 report, the global probiotics market is projected to grow steadily during the next four years, with a compound annual growth rate of 7% during the forecast period. “This market research analysis identifies the health benefits of probiotics as one of the primary growth factors for this market,” according to Technavio.

Offering a wide variety of cultured and fermented foods—think everything from kefir to kimchi—is a start, those on the front lines say.

“Consumer awareness of probiotics is at an all-time high, presenting a great opportunity to enter the personalized nutrition space with products that feature unique and targeted benefits,” Quilter said.

“Introducing people to nutritious, whole foods that are even tastier than fast foods and artificially flavored snacks will give retailers the chance to show how vital they are to their communities,” Miller of Lifeway said. “It goes beyond the transactional; food and nutrition are the cornerstone of good health. The retailers who lead the way will be seen as an indispensable part of consumers’ plans for wellness.”