



## **GUT REACTION:**

Interest in digestive health  
is driving product opportunities

When it comes to consumer health interests, the topic of the year is certainly gut health – and with good reason. Turns out that modern science is finally proving what Hippocrates knew 2,000 years ago: that overall good health is strongly linked to our gut health. Today, we call it the microbiome and understand that this community of microorganisms contains 40 trillion bacteria hard at work helping the body and brain to function properly.

A growing body of evidence now suggests that a balance of healthy bacteria in the microbiome goes well beyond impacting digestion. Research now shows that these bacteria play a role in a range of body systems, from balancing blood glucose levels to the way we store fat.<sup>1</sup> Studies are also now making the link between the gut and the brain, with mounting evidence that microbes can produce neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine, that can affect mood.<sup>2</sup>

So it's no wonder that consumers are interested in improving their gut health. And this is translating to a whole new world of products. According to New Nutrition Business' Ten Key Trends in Food, Nutrition and Health 2020, digestive wellness is the number-one trend, and is at the epicenter of food and health product development. While the emerging science and media attention are driving the trend, it has also gained momentum, according to the Ten Key Trends report, because consumers are highly benefit-focused, and digestive health is an area in which they can feel the benefits of changing their diet and consuming specific products.<sup>3</sup>

Laurie Demeritt, of research firm The Hartman Group, would seem to agree. In a recent article, she wrote that consumers are “turning internally to their own bodily cues (starting with digestion) to judge the healthfulness of foods and beverages.”<sup>4</sup>

All this is creating a boom market for products touting digestive health benefits. Data from Grandview Research put the global digestive health market size at \$32.7 billion in 2017, and projected a compound annual growth rate of 7.3% through 2025... to top more than \$57 billion.<sup>5</sup>

Probiotics make up the lion's share of raw material ingredients in the digestive health segment, in part due to the rising awareness of these healthy bacteria and their inherent presence in a variety of product types, such as yogurt and other fermented foods. But now prebiotics from fiber (which provide food for the probiotics to help them thrive) are also a rising star in the category. Food enzymes are another up-and-coming raw material that is expected to see expanding growth, especially with rising demand from the food and beverage segment.<sup>6</sup>

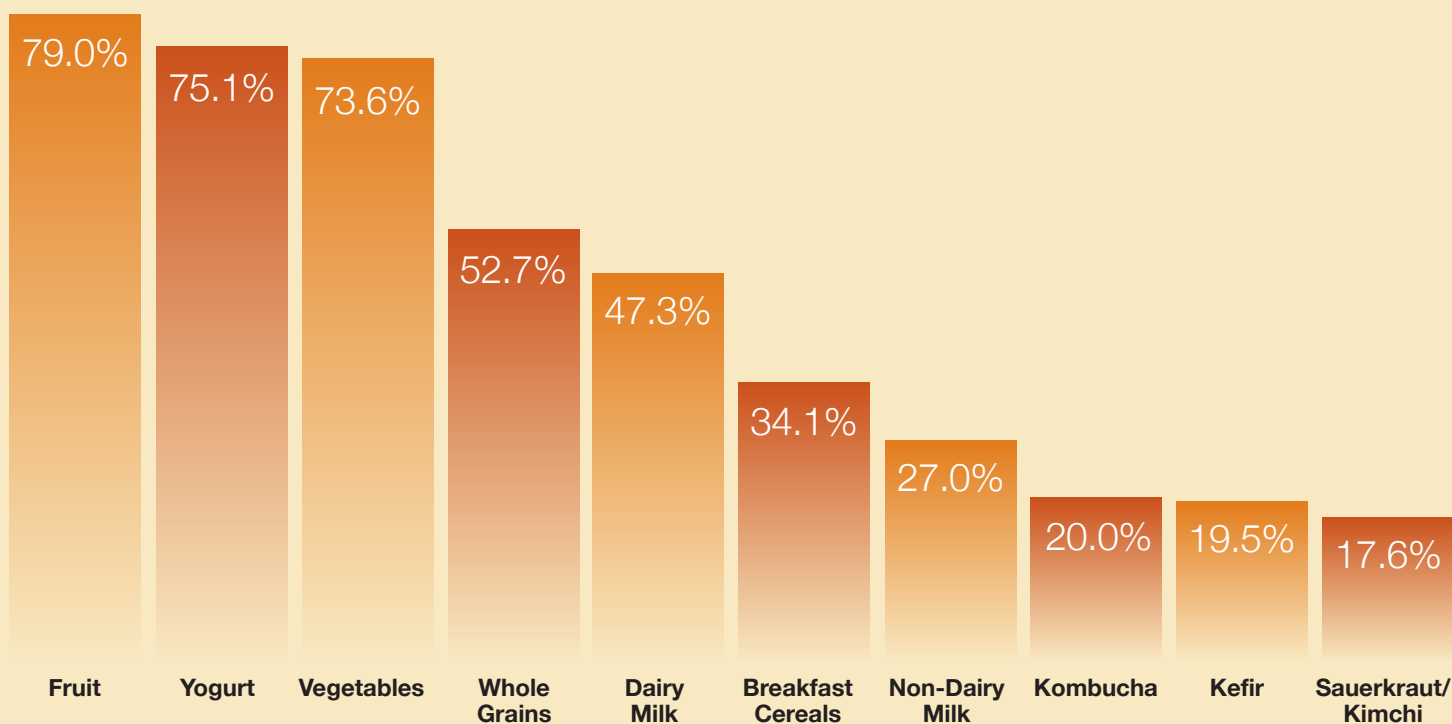
## Beyond yogurt

Product development in the category is going in various directions because consumers around the world now recognize that a wide range of products is good for digestive health. In the United States, for example, more than half of consumers now believe that foods like yogurt, fruits, vegetables and whole grains are important to maintain digestive health, while nearly half now also say that they perceive foods like meat, coffee and pasta to be bad for their digestion.<sup>7</sup>



## FOODS CONSUMERS FAVOR FOR DIGESTIVE HEALTH

## Percent of consumers who believe these foods are good for digestive health



Source: *New Nutrition Business*. Ten Key Trends in Food, Nutrition, and Health 2019.

While dairy products have been at the forefront of the gut health trend, as consumers zero in on the different types of foods that contain healthy bacteria, they also are increasingly open to trying new types of products that offer digestive health benefits. And product developers are not disappointing them. For example, foods and beverages that contain both probiotics and prebiotics (sometimes called synbiotics) are seeing growing traction. Advancement in production technology and brand investment in new research and development, such as in spore-forming probiotics and microencapsulation, have made probiotics resistant to processing and more shelf-stable, which has propelled product development into new delivery formats, especially foods and beverages. Kellogg's, for example, introduced its Happy Inside breakfast cereal containing both probiotics and prebiotics.

### A bright future

As consumers feel the benefits of ongoing digestive maintenance, they also are increasingly seeking out fermented products beyond traditional yogurts, and embracing foods like kimchi, kefir and sauerkraut in a big way. Fermented beverages are gaining particular momentum, as drinks like kombucha gain mainstream appeal.

Products that offer additional fiber are also on-trend for their ability to support immunity, normal healthy blood glucose levels, and healthy weight maintenance. Given that adequate intake of fiber is relatively low for most Americans,<sup>8,9</sup> this is a particularly important development. Product formulators have a number of options in this space.

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Prebiotic ingredients, for example, bring good scientific support and strong function to this area. Ingredients like chicory root fiber contain inulin, a fiber with well-studied prebiotic effects in the gastrointestinal tract,<sup>10,11,12</sup> which also can function as an effective sugar-displacing ingredient.

Resistant starch is another good ingredient solution for adding fiber to products. Plentiful in foods like chickpeas, lentils and some grains, such as barley, it is a form of starch that is not digested in the small intestine, but rather passes through to the large intestine, where it is fermented and provides food for gut bacteria.

As science on digestive health continues to emerge and consumers gain more knowledge and awareness of these different gut-supporting ingredients and their benefits, they will continue to embrace a variety of new and different products. Innovation in this space will continue, and product developers should be prepared for a quickly evolving landscape.

#### References

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