



Perspective: Export Expertise

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Aging world creates dairy opportunity

If you think the emphasis placed on diet's role in maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle is significant now, just wait a few years.

The spotlight on how the foods and beverages we consume help to reduce the risk of adverse conditions as we age — or help ensure “healthy aging” — will brighten substantially, and that could be a good thing for the U.S. dairy business.

We are seeing an unprecedented demographic shift in age throughout the globe — “without parallel in the history of humanity,” in the words of the United Nations’ “World Population Aging” report.

By 2050, for the first time ever, the number of people over 60 will exceed the number of those under 15, the report says. A full 21 percent of the projected population — nearly 2 billion people — will be over 60 at mid century. That’s up from about 600 million today.

The shift will impact almost all nations — developed and developing alike. It will stress economies, health care systems, employment and productivity, and social structures. It will have, according to the United Nations, “major consequences and implications for all facets of human life.”

To minimize costs and economic and social disruption while not bankrupting a nation, “we need to succeed in having healthy aging,” Armin Fidler, World Bank lead advisor for health policy, told the Global Health Forum in Washington, D.C., last October. “We have to focus not just on aging, but on the quality of aging and ... the health status of the elderly.”

One of the key planks in any healthy aging platform is nutrition — a sector in which dairy excels.

The nutritional benefits of dairy products and ingredients dovetail perfectly with aging-related health

concerns, creating fertile ground in which to grow U.S. dairy sales both in the United States and abroad.

Milk products already have one well-established foot in the healthy aging door with the link between dairy calcium and osteoporosis deterrence. But calcium is only one part of the story.

Whey protein is increasingly acknowledged by the health community as an important tool in the fight against the age-related loss of muscle mass, function and strength known as sarcopenia.

Many U.S. consumers, however, are still unfamiliar with the condition. And although some are aware of the role protein plays in muscle health, they often fail to make the connection that dairy products are a good source of protein — or that whey proteins are such high-quality proteins.

Mature U.S. adults (over 45 years old) who exercise regularly are more likely to have absorbed the whey protein message, but other U.S. demographic groups less so. And most overseas consumers in U.S. export target markets are even further behind the curve.

The case for dairy is a compelling one if presented in the right way. Aging is a sensitive subject and there is risk of alienating consumers. No one wants to talk about the myriad ailments and physical deterioration associated with getting older. Consumer packaged goods manufacturers are asking, “What do consumers want when it comes to healthy-aging products, and how do I talk to them about it.”

USDEC is intensifying its focus on the healthy aging market by emphasizing dairy ingredients’ capacity to reduce the risk of adverse health

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U.S. DAIRY EXPORT COUNCIL

conditions in the future and to address specific consumer concerns, such as muscle loss.

On the plus side, consumers generally agree that good nutrition is a critical component in maintaining health and aging well. Affluent seniors here, in Japan — the country with the highest median age — and in Western Europe are willing to spend money on foods that provide proven benefits, such as cognitive maintenance, and help them maintain quality of life. With the rate of aging in developing countries outpacing developed nations (and developing countries leading economic growth), that willingness is likely to quickly spread the world over.

USDEC research has shown that messages built around themes such as maintaining mobility, staying active longer and remaining independent resonate with adults 55 and over. People want more options on how they can age more healthily and reduce health care costs through preventive means.

The dairy industry has some assistance in getting the word out. Governments have a vested interest in maintaining a healthy population both to stoke their economic engines and minimize the budgetary stress of health care. Increasingly, they are actively supporting preventive methods, such as diet, to maintain wellbeing and encourage healthy aging, and implementing policies to protect against diseases and obesity.

Calcium and whey protein are just the start. Research continues into additional dairy benefits that may reduce the risk of major chronic diseases. Already, work funded by the U.S. dairy industry through USDEC, the Dairy Research Institute and Dairy Management Inc. has found potential scientific links between dairy consumption and blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Companies often talk about the coveted 18-49 demographic. The implications of the global age shift suggest that, in the years ahead, companies who focus only there and dismiss those 60-plus might soon find themselves over the hill. CMN

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