

Blog Kiwifruit to Rival Prunes & Probiotics in Digestive Health?

By Ewa Hudson, Head of Health and Wellness Research, Euromonitor International | July 1, 2015

With the high-protein trend gaining, digestive products containing proteolytic enzymes could gain importance.



Kiwis contain actinidin, a proteolytic enzyme that can break down proteins in dairy, fish and eggs.

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Fiber and probiotics have long been dominant as natural digestive aids, but now there is a newcomer popping its head above the parapet: kiwifruit, inherently rich in an enzyme that helps the body to digest proteins and an aid in alleviating constipation. The high protein trend may finally give the kiwifruit the push it needs to enter the realm of mainstream digestive health products.

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Fiber & Probiotics Currently Still Rule

Digestive health prime positioned foods and beverages continue to deliver moderate but steady growth. In 2014, the category accrued global value sales of \$77.2 billion, up from \$68.2 billion in 2009. Thus far, probiotics and fiber have dominated the scene. To illustrate, in eight of the 54 country markets covered by [Euromonitor International's](#) in-depth health and wellness research, [Yakult](#) is the leading digestive wellness brand.

The explosive growth achieved in the early 2000s by probiotic yogurt products may have been tempered by saturation and difficulties in obtaining authorized health claims, most notably in the EU, but, in consumers' minds, probiotic dairy products are, by now, inextricably linked to healthy bowel movements.

Only fiber is even more strongly associated with digestive health. First of all, this is due to simple common sense: stool needs bulk to move efficiently through the intestine, and fiber provides just that. And then there is a solid scientific evidence base attesting to fiber's positive impact on digestive health, including bowel cancer prevention.

People are generally aware it is plant matter that provides fiber, and this includes fruit. Figs, prunes and also prune juice, for example, are traditional home remedies against constipation. In 2013, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) even approved the following health claim pertaining to prunes: "Dried plums/prunes can contribute to normal bowel function."

Fruit Enzymes Come to the Fore

Fruit, however, can help the digestive process along in other ways, for example by providing enzymes that break down protein. Proteins can be very hard to digest, as anyone who has ever passed out on the sofa shortly after having wrestled with a giant slab of steak can probably attest to.

The rising star on the horizon is none other than the kiwifruit (*Actinidia deliciosa*). Kiwis contain actinidin, a proteolytic enzyme that has shown particular efficacy in breaking down the proteins found in dairy, fish and eggs. In April 2015, a new study was published by [Nutrition Research](#) suggesting that ACTAZIN, a powdered kiwi ingredient made by New-Zealand-based Anagenix Ltd from the flesh of the green Hayward variety, was clinically useful for alleviating constipation.

One major player that seems convinced that kiwifruit products are the next big thing in digestive health is none other than [Nestlé](#). In 2011, the company acquired a stake in Vital Foods, maker of kiwifruit-based dietary supplements and functional beverages. Vital Foods is based in New Zealand, and its flagship brands are Phloe (chewable tablets and capsules) and Kiwi Crush functional beverages, available in classic, tropical and wild berry flavors. The products are marketed as 100% natural and suitable for everyone not allergic to kiwifruit, including children, pregnant and breastfeeding women.

As industry insiders will be aware, fruit-enzyme-based digestive aids have been around for a while. The best known, thus far, are papain (extracted from the papaya plant) and bromelain (from bromeliads, of which pineapple is one). Digestive aids containing papain and bromelain proteolytic enzymes can be found in every health food shop in the dietary supplements section.

Admittedly, most of these products do not derive their active ingredients from the fruit itself, but from other parts of the plant, where the enzymes are present in higher concentrations. However, health-conscious consumers who trust in natural remedies often eat fresh papaya and/or pineapple for dessert and/or drink juice made from these fruits in order to prevent digestive discomfort after their meals. Fresh kiwifruit may also stand to benefit in the foreseeable future once its functional benefits become more widely known.

Plenty of Scope for New Product Developments

With the high-protein trend still in the global expansion phase, digestive products containing proteolytic enzymes are bound to gain in importance, especially if the products are positioned as entirely natural. To this end, it may be advantageous for potential players to emphasize that their products contain kiwifruit ingredients made from the whole flesh of the fruit, rather than an extract, which may be perceived by consumers as highly processed or otherwise “chemically interfered with.”

In terms of products (besides dietary supplements), the possibilities are wide-ranging: yogurts, juices, smoothies, snack bars and other types of snacks, beverages, desserts and even baby food provide fertile ground for new product developments. There's also a major opportunity in products catering for older consumers. The body's ability to secrete digestive juices declines as it ages, and so the elderly could well do with some extra help on this front.

On a final note, kiwifruit products are not going to displace probiotics or high-fiber foods. Rather, they provide a very welcome, complementary tool in the fight against digestive discomfort. They are a new avenue to explore for consumers who may not have experienced success with either probiotics or fiber, as these act in a very different way from proteolytic enzymes.

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