

## Food and Nutrition Issues Likely to Impact the Dairy Industry in the Next 1 to 3 Years

### 1. **Obesity continues to be a hot political, social and public-health platform**

Although some reports claim obesity rates have plateaued, obesity is still a top priority in public-health circles because of its association with chronic disease such as diabetes, metabolic syndrome and, most recently, cancer. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently released a report advocating for more grocery stores in urban areas, restricting high calorie foods in fast-food restaurants, encouraging a stronger community police force to enable outdoor exercise and generally linking cost and convenience to healthy food selection. The Surgeon General and First Lady Michelle Obama are also involved in obesity initiatives, supporting a “small steps” approach and focusing on changes in schools, at the workplace, in our communities, home environments and in the medical community. Generally, low-fat milk is well accepted in these discussions. Pressure will continue to be placed on the food industry to play a lead role in obesity initiatives.

### 2. **Public-health efforts target sodium reduction to improve health**

Sodium is the newest target in the public-health debate around healthy eating, due to its link to hypertension and heart disease. Reports estimate that up to \$18 billion per year could be saved in health care costs if sodium intake was reduced by one-third. However, there is individual variation in how people react to dietary sodium, with some more responsive, or “salt-sensitive,” than others. In addition, some experts believe that we will simply increase our overall food intake in order to get the sodium we are “programmed” to consume.

The food industry is already reformulating products to reduce sodium content in anticipation of increased pressure from consumers and public-health stakeholders. Levels being suggested as daily intakes are so low that many commonly consumed, nutrient-rich products—including cheese—could be jeopardized. The food industry has issues such as food safety, flavor, texture and shelf life to consider in low-sodium products. This is a situation in which the health professional and the food industry will need to work together for solutions that benefit the consumer without compromising taste, food safety or health.

### 3. **Dietary fat may not be the demon once believed**

New evidence indicates that some of the early research on dietary fat may have been misinterpreted, and that scientists do not know as much about dietary fat as once believed. Previously thought to be a significant predictor of heart disease, recent analyses show that saturated fat may not be linked to cardiovascular disease; rather, other factors—physical activity, smoking and body weight—may play bigger roles. Along the same lines, dairy is known to contribute significantly to saturated-fat intake but does not seem to increase the risk of heart disease, possibly due to the types of saturated fat in dairy foods. This will ultimately be good news for dairy, but after 30 years of hearing that dietary fat—particularly saturated fats—are unhealthy, this paradigm will be difficult to change in the eyes of the health professional and consumer. More research is needed to confirm these findings and substantiate this new direction.

#### **4. Vitamin D's status as superstar nutrient not waning**

The list of vitamin D's benefits continues to grow, from bone health to enhanced immunity, improved cognitive performance and cancer prevention. Studies show that optimal benefit occurs with intake levels much higher than the current recommendation, making it likely that the recommendation will increase in the future. The Institute of Medicine is currently conducting a review of the dietary recommendation for vitamin D, which is due out in late spring of 2010. Fortified dairy products, currently excellent sources of vitamin D, could lose their stronghold as a food source of vitamin D as manufacturers start looking to fortify other products in an attempt to help consumers reach the recommended intake levels. Supplementation could also be seen as a practical way to reach the recommendation.

#### **5. Dietary Guidelines due out in late 2010 amidst conflict**

The updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans is slated to come out late in 2010. Spirited discussions among the Dietary Guidelines committee members revolve around the topics of sodium, long-term risks and benefits of low-carbohydrate diets, the affordability of eating according to the Guidelines, whether nutrient density of foods should be considered and whether the Guidelines indeed significantly reduce chronic-disease risk. The process is considered biased by some people, because much of the nutrition research upon which the Guidelines are based—and in which many of the Committee members are engaged—is funded by industry or represent the personal perspective of the member. It is unclear how milk and dairy will fare in the release and whether the current recommendation of three servings per day will hold.

#### **6. Nutrition policy becomes increasingly restrictive**

As the obesity crisis gets more media attention, political pressure builds to enact change. Policy makers increasingly see restricting the availability of junk food and even taxing certain “bad” foods as the solution to the childhood-obesity problem. While federal efforts to tax soft drinks failed last year, individual states are responding by placing restrictions on and taxing certain foods. Taxing “junk” foods has the added benefit of helping to balance state and local budgets. Policies that restrict access to certain foods are also perceived as successfully addressing the problem. Dairy foods that contain sugar and fat could be negatively impacted by such policies. Some school districts are already limiting or eliminating flavored milk. It remains to be seen if this will result in an overall drop in milk consumption among schoolchildren.

#### **7. Satiety as a new tool to address weight management**

Interest in satiety as a way to manage body weight is growing, with research looking at hormones as well as specific components and foods that induce feelings of fullness, reducing intake at subsequent meals. Protein in general, and whey protein in particular, seem to have satiety-promoting effects. Dairy products—including yogurt drinks fortified with components such as fiber—are also being investigated. Consumers will become increasingly familiar with and seek out satiety-promoting foods in an attempt to manage their weight naturally, without feeling hungry or deprived.

#### **8. Sustainability a growing factor in food choices**

As consumers become increasingly aware of the environmental impact of their lifestyle and dietary choices, sustainability is a priority on several levels—from the food industry to the retail level, from government and public policy to the home front. Attempts are being made to quantify carbon footprint; however, there is no consensus on what aspect(s) of sustainability—production practices, food-miles traveled, or overall carbon footprint—to measure.

In a move to reduce levels of greenhouse gas emissions, some food service providers are offering menus with fewer animal-food offerings. Carbon counters for food, increasingly available to the consumer, focus on environmental parameters but do not consider factors such as cost, convenience, food safety or nutrient density. It will be critical to teach the consumer—and the food service and health professional—that sustainability encompasses many areas, not just whether a food is organic, locally grown or has a small carbon footprint. In particular, we need to evaluate foods based on their ability to enhance our health and well-being. Dairy will bode well here, as its nutrient package is optimal for promoting health and preventing disease at all ages.

## **9. Plant-based diets gain momentum**

Concurrent with the sustainability movement, there is an increase in advocacy for plant-based diets. Many perceive plant-based diets as being healthier, more eco-friendly, less expensive and more ethical. It is unclear whether this movement is driven solely by a small but vocal group, or if significant numbers of consumers will embrace it as well. For most, plant-based diets don't mean the elimination of animal food products, rather a focus on eating more plant-based and fewer animal food products.

One of the concerns expressed by some health professionals about plant-based diets is the association with lower bone-mineral density, which may put people at risk for fractures and osteoporosis. Consumers who seek the benefits of more eco-friendly diets may opt for organic, antibiotic-free or rBST-free food products. Consumers and health professionals need to be educated as to the short- and long-term unintended consequences of following strict plant-based diets, specifically deficiencies in certain nutrients.

## **10. Corporate wellness programs, in-store clinics and social media provide new opportunities for nutrition education**

Focus on health, wellness and disease prevention in the corporate arena is resulting in the emergence of wellness programs across the country. Short-term, such programs are known to increase productivity and morale; long-term, they are seen to save money on insurance premiums. In-store clinics with programs for people with diabetes, asthma and weight-control issues are also on the rise. These non-traditional venues will present opportunities for nutrition education to be delivered, targeting specific disease states and population subgroups.

The Internet and social media are increasingly sources of useful health information for the consumer. The growth of social media supports friend-to-friend, peer-to-peer and interest-group communications, often influencing consumer decisions. Unfortunately, these un-refereed forums often provide inaccurate, incomplete or misleading information, allowing perception and emotions to override science. The consumer will struggle with "information-overload;" however, this will present an opportunity to position the health professional as the expert.

*The Trends newsletter updates industry leaders on emerging nutrition and health issues likely to have an impact upon dairy foods and the industry. The trends tracking system is designed to identify issues early and track their development through multiple communications channels. Analysis is done biannually on the issues. For more information, please contact Kendall House at [khouse@dairycouncilofca.org](mailto:khouse@dairycouncilofca.org).*