

The evolution of active nutrition and why it is so important

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Grandma is getting in 10,000 steps a day; dad won't stop talking about his Zone 2 minutes; and your nephew has a whole YouTube channel devoted to his time at the gym. If there's one thing the generations can seemingly agree on, it's that living an active lifestyle is important. In fact, from 2021 to 2023, the number of global consumers who describe themselves as healthy rose from 61% to 68%¹.

The active nutrition sector is large and it is growing. Why the not-so-sudden surge? Awareness has grown considerably of the benefits of living an active lifestyle, and that it's far more than heart rate and weight that stand to lower. Stress levels, cholesterol and blood sugar all drop, while mood, how much sleep we're getting and energy levels all rise. Thanks to that magic elixir exercise, more and more are achieving a sense of holistic well-being. And for most, the goal is to keep up that active lifestyle well into old age. But active bodies need nutritional support to keep them going. What follows is an exploration on how we got here, where we're headed, and the specific active nutrition trends and ingredients that are going to fuel us on the way there.

Redefining the category: From body builders to yogis

As far back as the 1970s, modern sports nutrition was being practised by consumers, if only a few. Bodybuilding was finding its way out of the professional ranks and into local neighbourhood gyms and home gyms. Some things never change, as protein and its muscle-building properties were the star of the show back then. The 80s brought the aerobics boom and made fitness culture more enjoyable and accessible for the mainstream. The 2000s saw leaps in food technology and recipe development, ushering functional ingredients into



indulgence food. Sports nutrition expanded into snacking in the 2010s with all the new formats being introduced into that sector.

Finally, personalised nutrition is shaping the 2020s with a wide variety of foods and beverages offering an enormous selection of functional ingredients to fit into individual lifestyles of all generations. For some time now, the benefits of these products have been sought out by folks who wouldn't characterise themselves as "athletes" or playing "sports." A name change for the sector was in order, one that applies to everyone from marathoners to yogis to those of us taking a walk around the block after dinner, so the category of sports nutrition has been shifting to one called active nutrition.

To underscore this evolution away from serious athletes to the everyday consumer, the active nutrition category even applies to those who

technically may not be that physically active. E-gamers are keen on products that help improve clarity, focus and energy and are attracted to many of the same supplementary foods and beverages as gym-goers. Convenience is key to the gamer cohort, so they don't have to leave the keyboard or controller in the middle of a bout. And if it comes in a format that won't make the buttons sticky, all the better.

Better-tasting plant-based performance

Global plant-forward consumers – defined as flexitarians, vegetarians or vegans – state that improved taste and texture are motivating them to try more plant-based products². The gritty textures and off-notes that were the hallmarks of older plant-based products are no longer acceptable. Interestingly, consumers have also demonstrated an increased interest in a diet of diverse protein sources, including the traditional, animal-derived type like whey, alongside plant-derived options like soy¹. So, employing clean-tasting plant protein, flavour modulation technologies and on-trend flavour profiles is the surest way to please hardcore vegans or flexitarian eaters when they want to lean green. Ingredients like soy and pea proteins have been helpful in achieving an appealing appearance, texture, aroma and taste in plant-based products.

Additionally, active nutrition consumers love their gummies, and this format is only growing in this space. However, consumers interested in adhering to a vegan lifestyle are often challenged finding vegan – read gelatine-free – gummies. Offering consumers gelatine-free products in clearly labelled packaging that attests to the gelatine-free gummies within is a sound strategy for winning over active lifestyle vegans.



While consumers attribute a range of advantages to plant-based products, many are concerned about the absence of essential nutrients that are present in animal sources. Brands can address this issue by fortifying their plant products with additional protein and ingredients not often found in abundance in some plant-based products, such as fibre, prebiotics, probiotics and postbiotics. Furthermore, soy can provide BCAAs, which are highly desired amino acids, and is regarded as a "complete protein" with a Protein Digestibility Corrected Amino Acid Score (PDCAAS) of 1.

For example, ADM's recently introduced ProFam® Pea 572 and 573, which are low sodium, are helping to meet consumer desire for high-protein, nutrient-dense products while potentially assisting formulators in meeting clean label requirements. Blending soy, wheat, or pea proteins can also maximise protein diversity and quality while enhancing flavour and texture.

The gut and muscle orrelation

Consumers (and scientists, too) are just beginning to understand how much the gut microbiome shapes everything we feel, think and do. There is a growing body of research that points to its role in recovery after workouts and that it may support the formation of lean muscle mass, metabolic health and body composition. This connection is called the "gut-muscle axis" and is informing a healthy portion of the product development in this space.

As a multi-strain probiotic blend, ADM's Active Lifestyle Formulation is at the forefront of this innovation and has shown to support aspects of exercise and recovery. The formulation brings together award-winning *Bifidobacterium longum* CECT7347 (ES1)*, *Lactobacillus casei* CECT9104 (BPL4) and *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* CECT8361 (BPL15), with clinical research showing that it supports certain biomarkers related to post-exercise oxidative stress³.

To help contextualise how important gut health is to active nutrition consumers, they list it among the top five areas overall they'd like to improve over the next calendar year – along with immune function, heart health, mental well-being and energy levels¹. Beyond being a muscle builder, consumers are coming to recognise that the gut microbiome plays an important role in their overall physical and emotional well-being⁴. As such, they're showing interest in active nutrition products packed with prebiotics, probiotics and postbiotics and are looking for informational marketing to help educate them on which supports what.

Market research further shows that the gut



is on consumers' minds, with the global microbiome ingredient market expected to reach \$15.6 billion by 2027, indicating a 7.93% CAGR from 2023 to 2027⁵.

Don't go lite on electrolytes

Hydration and rehydration are on the tongues of virtually every EMEA Gen Z and millennial consumer, with 72% and 76%, respectively, saying hydration is an important part of their lifestyle⁴. Rapid rehydration through the use of electrolytes, in particular, has rapidly become the most sought-after attribute listed on beverage packaging amongst the younger groups⁴. The beverage market is seeing increasing opportunities in the workout recovery space, due in part to drinks being associated with hydration, which is a crucial component of the recovery process after exercise. As this market grows, we expect to see increased demand for products that provide and advertise quick hydration.

But it's not just rehydration after a workout that is important to consumers. Staying hydrated throughout the day has become a key concern for achieving optimal performance, as is supplementing their diet with vitamins and minerals that support an active lifestyle. ADM's "CoolFit lime drink" concept was developed with these needs in mind. It is an isotonic beverage concept with B6 and B12, niacin, magnesium, choline, L-carnitine and caffeine from a natural source, all in a refreshing citrus flavour. These functional ingredients are perceived by many to confer additional benefits that help propel them through their day with greater energy, focus and a better mood.

Boosts with botanicals

Overall, consumers are generally seeking

ingredients and solutions that they deem as "closer to nature," looking for more "natural ways" to lead an active life. One way to offer this to them is through the use of botanical extracts to boost energy levels and support performance and recovery. Guarana and yerba mate, for instance, are natural sources of caffeine. Grapeseed extract, which has antioxidants and contains polyphenols, and red beet, which contains natural nitrates, are also botanical extracts emerging in the active nutrition category.

Concepts like ADM's "Focus Gummies" provide busy active nutrition consumers with a boost in between meals, as well as can support e-gamers during gaming sessions. They employ a natural source of energy from guarana, and it also includes B12 and acerola in a convenient and tasty format with on-trend flavours like cola-lemon, calamansi and pink grapefruit.

Consumers aren't taking this lying down

Living a life with a sense of well-being is tricky, but more and more consumers have begun to crack the code. It is becoming clear that leading an active lifestyle is key for brain, body and mood health, and consumers are appreciative of products that help them achieve it, making the active nutrition category one of paramount importance for the foreseeable future. Plant products will become more popular to those on the flexitarian to vegan spectrum if they're tasty. There is a hunger for foods and beverages that leverage the power of the microbiome. The thirst for beverages that aid in hydration, rehydration and recovery is far from being quenched. And doing all of the aforementioned with ingredients derived from natural sources is preferred. It's an exciting time to be working in this category, and brands must make sure their nutrition is dialled in to develop what's next in innovation.

**Bifidobacterium longum* CECT7347 (ES1) is used by ADM Biopolis under license from CSIC.

References:

- 1 FMCG Gurus, Active Nutrition in 2024, Global Report, January 2024
- 2 ADM Outside Voice, Global Protein Consumer Discovery Report, 2023
- 3 Macarro, JMS; et al. (2021) Antioxidants. 10(2): 323
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