

HFMA Bulletin

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Back to the future – can we continue the new 'healthy normal'?

Now we've passed the two-year mark since COVID took off, we're seeing a return to normal life, with restaurants, bars and airports packed. But as we scramble to reclaim our lives, we must do all we can to ensure the healthy changes that were prevalent during lockdown – home cooking, outdoor exercise, preventative nutrition – continue.

Are we seeing a 'return to normality' for supplements? There's certainly been a slow-down in VMS sales, with current year-on-year sales about 4% down [*Nielsen*]. Unsurprisingly, the immune category saw the biggest surge in demand over the last couple of years, with vitamin D, C, turmeric and probiotics (if I can use that word!) as big risers. But we're now seeing a predictable steep decline (19%) in the immune category. Despite this, there is reason to be hopeful as vitamin D and C may be down year-on-year (-4% and -17%) but remain buoyant compared to 2019 pre-pandemic figures (+159% and +15%). Unlike immunity, sleep and stress are two related VMS categories which have sustained growth beyond lockdown (+5%) partly due to increased adoption of smartphone technology.

Another major trend over the last few months was the bounce back in bricks and mortar sales and decline in what we can now see were artificially high e-commerce gains. The convenience and face-to-face interaction of in-store shopping is something that online

just can't replicate. Despite a drop in online sales, the rates are still higher than 2019 (up to 180% growth versus 2019), again showing that new habits may have been retained.

The other factor set to dominate VMS market dynamics for the foreseeable is the cost of living crunch. With inflation at its highest since 1992, the everyday Brit now faces a flood of rising prices. Certain nutritional categories will be scrutinized even more.

Still, there is plenty to be optimistic about and much that can be done to ensure we keep the 'new normal' health momentum going. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is seeking views on how to improve the vitamin D status of the population with a view to: addressing health disparities related to vitamin D; improving awareness of vitamin D among the public and healthcare professionals; and improving access to vitamin D status through supplements.

This Government-backed consultation is something the HFMA is engaging with, and will be pressing to make recommendations simpler; for example, Government advice on vitamin D should be changed to encompass the whole population, all year. The pandemic has given the public a newfound appreciation for wellbeing, resulting in a more thoughtful and preventative approach. As long as we can maintain our healthy habits, despite the odd relapse, it's hopefully set to stay.

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