

HFMA UPDATE

Martin Last, Director General



The HFMA *Health of The Nation* survey

Just published, I am pleased to introduce this year's Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA) *Health of the Nation* report, which takes a comprehensive look at how the UK population views their health, diets, and use of food supplements. The findings help us prioritise our work and provides our members tools for strategic planning and future activity. The report is clear on the need for more information to fill information gaps and that across all demographics, people are calling for clearer labelling, especially for probiotics.

Probiotics are now a prominent feature of many health-conscious diets, but identifying these products isn't always straightforward. More than six in 10 (64 per cent) said they would find it helpful if products containing probiotics were clearly marked on packaging. Under current UK guidance, manufacturers are not permitted to use the term 'probiotic' on pack labels or in marketing materials. This stands in contrast to several EU member states that have adopted more flexible interpretations, recognising the unnecessary burden the restriction places on producers and the confusion it creates for consumers.

Through publication of this report, the HFMA is calling on Government to review this position, which would not require changes to legislation but could play a crucial role in improving public understanding and supporting better health for our population. By issuing updated guidance – for example, allowing the use of the term 'contains probiotic' as a content claim – the

UK could provide much-needed clarity for shoppers and remove the inconsistency between professional medical advice and the commercial communication of these products.

In our survey, almost a quarter (23 per cent) reported a healthcare professional had recommended they take a probiotic as part of a treatment. This is particularly prevalent in those aged 25-34 – of those who have been recommended a probiotic, 44 per cent fall into this age bracket.

A significant majority (63.6 per cent) take food supplements regularly and there is clear recognition from the public that they support maintaining a healthy lifestyle. In contrast, our previous survey in 2021, conducted during the pandemic, indicated a snapshot of supplement use to be 71 per cent and shows how the pandemic boosted use of food supplements during that time.

There also appears to be a shift in age demographics with 56 per cent of over 55s taking supplements but now 87 per cent of those aged 25-34 regularly taking these products. Despite the broad uptake in usage, a clear age divide was revealed, where for 16-24-year-olds, the most influential source of advice about supplements is no longer GPs or in-store experts but social media and online influencers. Over one in three (35 per cent) in this age group said these channels shaped choices.

This trend reflects the power and reach of digital content – but also carries real risk of misinformation, unqualified advice, and viral trends, which can lead to poor decision-making. However, the



solution isn't to dismiss these channels – it's to meet people where they are and raise the standard of information they're receiving. In this way, trusted voices must be amplified across digital and physical spaces to ensure decisions about supplementation are grounded in evidence, not algorithms. It is encouraging to see younger generations increasing use and awareness of supplements and that it is not only the domain of 'older' sections; it demonstrates opportunities for the trade to look at using social media as a way of conveying their message.

The survey also reveals that while reasons for taking supplements vary, the top three motivators continue to be general health and wellbeing, immune support, and fulfilling dietary gaps, such as not getting enough of a specific nutrient or covering occasional lapses. In addition, 57 per cent believe supplements are more important during diet or weight

management regimes. When calorie intake is reduced or food groups are restricted, many individuals see supplements as a practical way to ensure they still meet their body's essential needs. This demand isn't driven solely by weight management or aesthetic goals – it's shaped by cultural practices. During periods of fasting such as Ramadan, supplementation can provide vital

nutritional support.

This year's *Health of the Nation* report reveals a public that is health-conscious but under-informed. The path forward is clear. We need a renewed focus on prevention, more robust public health education, and stronger collaboration between government, health professionals, and the health food industry. The nation's health is at a crossroads. It's time to bridge the gap between awareness and action – and unlock the full potential of food supplements in supporting a healthier future.

The survey clearly demonstrates further benefit that HFMA membership provides valuable help in steering members future growth and opportunities. If you would like to know more about the benefits of membership to your company, visit www.hfma.co.uk, or contact me on 020 8481 7100.