

Prevention without barriers: HFMA calls on Health Secretary to 'modernise health communications'

By **jimmanson** - September 10, 2026



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Martin Last
HFMA Director General



The Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA) has delivered an open letter to the Health Secretary, Yvette Cooper, calling on her to review the UK's regulatory treatment of the term 'probiotic' and allow it to be used on pack. The trade group is also urging the government to undertake a wider review and modernisation of guidance on health communications.

Although considered an unauthorised health claim in the UK, there are now 11 EU countries who use the term and, the HFMA points out, a wide understanding by the general public and health professionals of what the term means.

'Considerable barrier'

The trade body says that many clinicians and health professionals recommend the use of probiotics but the current prohibition on the use of the term creates a “considerable barrier” to the aims of the practitioner seeking to provide preventative healthcare and supplementation to support a treatment protocol.

The HFMA points out that building a healthier population and preventative healthcare are key factors in government policy in helping to reduce the burden on the NHS. Making supplements easily identifiable for the population is a key factor in supporting this, it says.

The open letter also highlights the fact that around 70% of iron-deficient adults in the UK are menstruating women. It says: "This is well-established science, recognised by public health authorities. Businesses are nonetheless prevented from directing clear, evidence-based information at that group. The women most likely to need that information are the least likely to receive it."

The HFMA says that reviewing and modernising the guidance on health communications to "allow responsible, evidence-based information to reach the groups most likely to benefit" could have a significant impact without the need for major legislative changes. A straightforward change in UK guidance, it says, could reclassify 'probiotic' and the other 'biotic terms (including prebiotic and postbiotic) as falling within mandatory labelling requirements.

'Frustrating'

Martin Last, Director General HFMA, comments: "Current regulations make it difficult for responsible businesses to explain which groups are at higher risk of deficiency, even when the science is unambiguous and public health bodies recognise the need. In the case of probiotics, the understanding by the consumer of the term probiotics, is extremely high. Probiotics are often recommended by health professionals, and it is frustrating to know that individual cannot readily find these products on the shelf."

Last adds: "We have been discussing this issue with the Government for a long time and would hope that the Secretary of State sees our argument to be a valid one, especially as no change in the law is required to enact the change in the guidelines. Despite being safe, widely used and recommended in healthcare settings, probiotics can't be communicated clearly to the public, leaving people without the basic information they need to support their gut health and overall wellbeing."

Modernise guidance

The letter calls on Ministers to review the interpretive guidance on probiotic terminology, bringing UK practice into line with scientific consensus and comparable countries, and to modernise guidance on health communication to allow responsible, evidence-based information to reach the groups most likely to benefit.

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