



The power of protein

You cannot fail to have noticed that protein is seriously big business. But can such massive growth be sustained, and how do you ensure your customers are receiving the right education about their needs? **Rachel Symonds** reports.

Protein has become the star of the health food show in recent years. Not only is protein being added to every kind of food stuff conceivable, there are now shops that sell only protein products, whether it's a healthy smoothie or a nutritious snack bar.

But while the focus on staying fit and healthy through increased protein use can be seen as a positive, we have seen a huge explosion in protein related products to the market, and some with very questionable quality and health benefits.

This has raised certain issues; the quest for quality products is, of course, at the forefront, and so too is the very real need to educate shoppers about their protein needs, dependent on their lifestyle, what type of protein sources they need, how much, and consuming the right products not laden with junk.

"Protein is simply everywhere, in every possible flavour and combination. We live in an industry that is fast paced and driven by the media. Protein has never been so popular and has become the 'nutrient' du jour, especially with the revelation across all boards that protein is good for you and does not have to be seen as being a restrictive way of eating or lifestyle," explained Isabelle Nunn, Technical and Commercial Nutritionist at Kinetic, which distributes a number of brands, including Amazing Grass and Garden of Life.

"This is particularly true when comparing it to the gluten free, fat free,

dairy free sort of diets, which revolve around avoiding particular foods or food groups. In recent years, the rise of paleo, Atkins, the zone and other low carbohydrate diets have in fact sustained protein's MVP status."

Taisce Gillespie Clare, who works in the marketing team at Essential Trading, added: "High-profile marketing activity from big-hitting brands has given the protein trend mainstream visibility in recent years. The wide-ranging benefits linked to protein have been responsible for pushing it into the spotlight in the context of healthy eating. These multiple positive associations mean that usage of high-protein products is not limited to consumers with a single dietary want or need.

"A large proportion of the recent demand for protein is aspirational; marketing strategies have developed a link between muscular, toned and slim bodies portrayed in the media and protein. Protein has come to be seen as the panacea nutrient that can transform our bodies."

Kevin Smith, co-owner of gluten free protein-packed snacks, Battle Oats, pointed towards the fitness market for one of the reasons in the rise.

"Obviously, the trend for more exercise and healthy eating is massive and this has led to growing demand for nutritious options, particularly in the snacks market. With people leading increasingly busy lives, they want to be able to easily grab

a high protein snack, particularly post exercise," he explained.

"There's now a much greater understanding of the relationship between exercise and nutrition, fuelled by the popularity of health bloggers. As a result, we're finding that many of our customers want our high protein oat bars and cookies for muscle repair after exercise."

The need for education is a really important one, given the very mixed messages that consumers are bombarded with when it comes to protein.

"It is important to point out that despite everything out there, as a nutritionist and a pharmacist, the information laid out in the media must be taken with a pinch of salt. Information must be used and tailored to our individual bodies, health concerns and lifestyles. It must be used in a greater context to achieve certain results or outcomes we would expect from consuming protein products. It is important that the information provided to consumers is not misleading, as the FSA points out," Nunn said.

The science

Protein is a macronutrient, and something we need to consume on a daily basis, alongside a healthy, balanced diet.

Nunn explained: "Protein is the building block of our cells and is essentially what makes up our body. Stored primarily in our muscles and collagen, it is involved in several bodily functions. From a physiological point of view, protein and their component amino acids function as

not only transporters for other nutrients but also as hormones and enzymes in the body. Enzymes act as catalysts and can speed up reactions in the body.”

Rick Hay, Nutritional Director at Healthista, added: “It is one of the major food groups and is important for energy production, energy, cognition and immunity. Protein provides essential amino acids, which contribute to the healthy functioning of the body. If you are lacking in protein, immunity will suffer as will the body as a whole. Lethargy and low mood are symptoms of low protein and this can also cause hormonal disruption.”

So, what is the requirement in terms of intake?

“The general recommendation is to consume 0.8 to 1g per kg of body weight or 0.36g per pound. This recommended amount varies, depending on our needs, gender, activity levels, and in our life stage cycle amongst other things,” Nunn explained.

Hay continued: “It depends on how much exercise you are doing and what you are looking for but for general health it should be about half your body weight in grams i.e. 150lbs (10 stone 7) equals 75g. If you want to burn fat and are moving more, you would multiply your weight by .75, and if you are bodybuilding, it would be a gram for each pound of weight per day. Advice varies but I think that men should eat at least around 60g per day and women at least around 50g.”

And are we as a nation consuming what we should in terms of our protein requirements?

“Well, we are consuming more than we used to, for sure. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey indicates that the consumption is already around 45-55 per cent up on the figures and our current daily average intake in the UK is of 55g for men and 45g for women. This figure being an average amount, it is highly possible that in certain parts of the UK we are not actually consuming the right amounts to meet our needs,” Nunn commented.

“Protein can occasionally be a neglected food group compared to the two other macronutrients, carbohydrates and fats. This can be due to dietary preference, costs, since obtaining good quality protein comes with cost), convenience, but also a change in diet, with a rise in vegans and vegetarians, who may forget to top up on alternative sources of protein. In some parts of the UK, consumers may not also have the variety of protein products we have on offer in places like London to conveniently top up our needs particularly when on the go.”

NEW TO MARKET

The protein market innovates quickly, and there are new brands coming to market.

■ Kinetic has recently launched the Protein Superfood by Amazing Grass, which is available in three flavours, Original, Vanilla and Chocolate Peanut butter. It is an all-in-one protein organic nutritional shake providing 20g of plant-based protein from pea, chia, quinoa and hemp, seven alkalising greens from wheatgrass, barley grass, alfafa, spirulina, chlorella, broccoli and spinach and nine nutrient dense vegetables and fruits, which counts as two of your daily recommended servings. It is USDA organic certified, vegan, non-GMO, superfood combination.

■ Future protein launches from Kinetic include Garden of Life’s range of blends, providing highly digestible, grain free, gluten free, delicious, smooth, clean and creamy, with no gritty texture, innovative plant proteins.

■ Over at Healthista, there are two blends with three flavours of each – Lean Vegan Diet Protein and Lean Whey Diet Protein in Creamy Vanilla, Rich Chocolate and Berry Burst. They are supported by three nutrient powders, called Glow Food, Body Food and Night Food.

■ Battle Oats recently extended its free from range with the launch of a new line, the new protein cookie, which uses plant-based protein and is both gluten free and vegan. Initially launching with two flavours, chocolate chip and double chocolate, each cookie contains 10g of protein and 8g of fibre, as well as being non-GMO. Battle Oats is planning to extend the flavours of its oat bars later this year.

And it must be borne in mind that protein is essential.

Gillespie Clare explained: “We need sufficient protein in our diet because it supplies indispensable amino acids that our bodies cannot synthesise on their own. Together, they provide the essential building blocks vital for every cell in the body, building muscles, supporting brain function and learning, as well as balancing hormones and aiding digestion. It’s important for growth and maintaining strong bones, as well promoting the health of the heart and slowing the ageing process.”

However, he added a word of caution: “Protein is undoubtedly a key nutrient in a healthy diet, the question is how much do we need, and how much are we getting? Dietary surveys in the UK always reveal that we get more than enough protein from our diets. Once we start consuming more protein than our body requires, our kidneys then have to work to process and eliminate the waste products. As we are consuming unprecedented levels of protein, there is little research into the

long-term health effects that this may cause.”

But are there certain groups of people who require greater amounts of protein?

“The frail and elderly, who would generally feel weaker and need more energy and more muscle support, especially with the loss in general bone density. In addition, with the difficulty in perhaps consuming animal-based protein, they may often omit this important macronutrient. However, it is important that they do consume protein in other forms and from other sources,” Nunn advised.

Bear in mind children will have a different requirement too.

Nunn added: “The amount of protein children should eat is usually relative to their body weight and while their age

increases, the rate of growth slows down. Despite the amount of protein needed per pound decreases, their height and weight will continue to accrue and hence not only does the total amount of protein need to be higher but so does the total calories. This will serve to fuel their growth, hormones and other critical components for children and adolescent development.”

And don’t forget pregnant women, whose protein requirements rise to 1.1 g/kg/day (71g), which amount to almost more than a 50 per cent increase in protein intake to allow for foetal growth and milk production.

Nunn continued: “Those who are recovering from an illness also must make sure to have good amounts of protein for a healthy immune system. Last but not least, when we change our fitness and exercise routine’s frequency and intensity, we would need more protein for muscle replenishment and recovery.”

Hay also pointed out: “If you are exercising or training then you need to keep your protein levels up and if you are breastfeeding, more can help as it can if you are trying to lose weight and keep blood sugar levels stable.”

The true benefits

So, what are the health benefits? And is there a lack of education out there about just what it is utilised for?

“The benefits of protein have been easy to convey by suggesting to consumers that it helps to make them feel fuller for longer, lose weight, and build muscle and might be more enduring than the pushes for high fibre, whole grains and omega 3 fatty acids that are also popular topics,” Nunn pointed out.

But what are they specifically seeking protein for, in terms of you as retailers understanding how to target your offering?

Nunn reported: “Individuals recognise the need and the importance of protein in the diet through the messages driven by general marketing and social media. There is also the buzz about protein being essential for weight loss and lean muscle, which has been a trend in both several fitness venues and across their social media accounts. The current trend also involves the protein blends used as inner beauty.”

Hay added: “People are realising that protein does far more in the body than just build lean muscle and that it can assist with the function of many body systems. It can help with hair, skin and nail health, it helps keep blood sugar levels steady and, therefore, reduces cravings and helps with mood and cognition, it helps with feelings of fullness and assists with recovery after exercise. More people are

► using it in smoothies to make a healthy meal replacement – it’s terrific for weight management.

“People are buying protein products to help with toning, weight management, energy levels, for hair, skin and nail health, to assist with exercise goals and lean muscle mass and to add nutrients to the diet.”

Nunn added: “By simply not eating enough protein in the diet to fuel our body’s tissues and support the body’s several functions, the result is the body having no other choice than breaking down our own muscles to get the amino acids from muscle fibres. Signs can hence include muscle weakness, fatigue and poor recovery from exercise. Hair and nails are essentially made of protein, and when our diet lacks protein, it will try to conserve the protein levels as much as possible and eventually shift hair growth into a ‘resting phase’. Hair shedding is experienced as well as brittleness and dryness. Skin dryness and the change in its appearance can also be signs of a lack of protein in the diet along with other factors.

“Our immune system may also suffer from a lack of protein, since research suggests that we experience a lot of important germ fighting cells, referred to as T cells. Therefore, the body loses the ability to fight off viruses and bacteria. Another symptom that may be associated with a lack of protein includes oedema, which can cause swollen lower legs and feet. *Harvard Health’s Publications* show that without enough protein, fluids can seep into surrounding tissues as protein would usually help to hold both salt and water in blood vessels.”

Quality factors

It’s crucial to keep in mind that the source of protein may be as important as the quantity.

“Many protein-enhanced products rely on whey, a waste product of the dairy industry, so clever marketing enables food companies to sell a cheap product at a high price. Consumers also need to be wary of the high levels of sugar and additives contained in mainstream protein products,” Gillespie Clare pointed out. “Ultimately, there is no true substitute for eating real, unprocessed foods. A healthy and balanced diet should provide you with all of the protein you need for optimal health.”

For Nunn, plant-based is the way forward.

She pointed out: “Some research indicates that the increase in protein requirement can be more safely met

PRODUCT EXPLOSION

Gone are the days when people would get their protein intake from food sources; today, we are a nation that can’t get enough of the fancy new products available on the market, a range that appears to grow by the week.

“People are looking for alternative plant proteins to get more nutritional value from fibre, healthy fats, and other vitamins and minerals that plants offer, with less saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol,” Gillespie Clare advised. “Protein snacks have become extremely popular, particularly those containing more natural ingredients such as nuts and dried fruits. Alternative plant-based protein is also selling extremely well, particularly those using hems, peas and rice powders.”

Nunn added: “The popularity of proteins in recent years has risen to the fact that proteins are not simply seen as consuming meat, fish or plant-based sources but by purchasing a convenient form of it that is integrated in a variety of products. We see proteins now in health bars, yoghurts, shakes, protein superfood blends, regular drinks, ice cream and even popcorn.

“They are easy to integrate and easily chosen off the shelf from a supermarket to a health food store or actually online. Since protein also now appeals to vegetarians or vegans, the presence of plant-based forms of protein in products have sharply risen in sales because of those customers who live such a lifestyle and others who hold certain beliefs.”

For Smith, the taste profile is crucial.

“As well as being healthy, protein products need to taste good and be satisfying and wholesome – for example, our healthy flapjacks and cookies were carefully developed to provide the ideal combination of carbohydrates, protein and fibre

while containing very little salt and fat. For sportspeople, products need to fit within the three stages of nutrition: priming; fuelling; and recovery,” he explained.

Looking ahead to the future development of the protein market, what do the experts forecast?

“Well the future is our oyster, which I think will hold more innovative forms of protein in products, further sourcing of exotic ingredients from far and beyond around the world and above all with the understanding of what consumers are after and that it fits with their lifestyle,” Nunn predicted.

“I think the future also revolves around providing protein to consumers that is affordable, healthy and good for the environment. With the concerns around climate change, consumers as well as companies are becoming more and more conscious about where they obtain and how they obtain their ingredients. The Protein Challenge 2040 is the first coalition exploring the future of protein and is also a fantastic project to look out for.”

She added: “There is more and more focus as well on the importance of supporting inner beauty, as well as outer beauty with plant-based proteins, combined with naturally powerful antioxidants, probiotics, superfoods, digestive enzymes and alkalising greens.”

For Hay, further twists on innovations will come to market.

“I think there will be more superfood protein blends and specific blends for specific conditions,” he said, adding: “I’m sure the sector will remain strong as more blends include more cofactors and nutrients to help improve the efficacy of protein blends.”

by plant-based protein than by animal protein. The factors taken into account include the fact that meat can be a major source of saturated fat and cholesterol, and is a common source of ingestible pathogens. In addition, meat is also a source of arachidonic acid, an inflammatory mediator that is the

precursor to the immunosuppressive eicosanoid PGE2.”

Gillespie Clare added: “As a vegetarian company, we promote plant-based proteins, which are rising in popularity dramatically as research is proving them to be the equal in terms of protein and vastly superior in terms of vitamins and minerals. Plant-based proteins also avoid components that are harmful to our health often contained in animal products, such as antibiotic residue, hormones, saturated fat, trans-fats, endotoxins and cholesterol.

Natural products such as nuts and nut butters, beans, pulses and legumes, quinoa and even vegetables can easily provide you with all your dietary protein requirements. People have come to associate protein with meat and dairy products, but the reality is that it is ubiquitous in the foods we eat, especially if they are unprocessed.”

So, what factors should you keep in mind when choosing brands to stock?

It all starts with diet, Nunn explained.

“First of all, as all nutritionists or health professionals out there, I need to point out that the protein intake should be taken in our daily routine through the foods we eat in our diet. Making sure that our diet predominantly contains more plant-based protein sources, along with our healthy fats, fibre, antioxidants rather than solely relying on animal based sources,” she said.

And what about if we then start adding in supplements?

Nunn added: “When looking into protein products, we should be looking at ingredients that we would happily put in our bodies just like those we would put on our plate, the type of protein that agrees with them, in terms of ease of digestion, intolerances or simply to abide with their beliefs.

“Looking simply at protein blends on the market, these are the following key points I would suggest; a certified organic protein, non-GMO ingredients, which have been ethically sourced (the label might explain so, no added sugars, binders, fillers, preservatives, or other artificial ingredients). A protein blend that is made with lots of greens, antioxidants, fruits, botanicals, superfoods or even probiotics would provide an exceptional overall product. Brands that follow sustainable practices are also good for the planet and not just for us.”

Smith continued: “Retailers must look carefully at the ingredients label of so-called high protein bars – in fact, our bars are nutritionally stronger than the competition, they have a higher protein content as well as more fibre and less sugar than the two leading brands.” **hfb**