

Harvesting the health promise of conjugated linoleic acid

Survey says: Strong prospects for ‘CLA rich’ beef

Cross Canada in-store survey captures consumer attitudes.

Hot on the heels of success with omega-3 fatty acids and other natural, health-based innovations for livestock products, researchers are beginning to test the market waters for potential “CLA rich” beef products.

Conjugated Linoleic Acid (CLA) is a type of healthy fatty acid already found naturally in beef and dairy products. CLA research is in early stages and more studies are needed to confirm specific CLA health benefits for humans. However, early studies based largely on animal models indicate that CLA may help fight or prevent diseases such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes and kidney disease. CLA may also help battle obesity and improve bone density.

The CLA Network is further exploring the health benefits of CLA and laying the groundwork for potential beef and dairy products that feature increased levels of this natural component.

To help drive this progress, the CLA Network conducted an in store survey of 800 consumers in Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto and Quebec City. Results and analysis of the survey have unveiled consumer perceptions that will help direct development and marketing strategies for potential CLA rich beef products.

“This survey was about testing the waters,” says Dr. Sean Cash, an agricultural economist at the University of Alberta who led the effort. “Because beef products with enhanced CLA levels are not yet available, we can’t simply examine purchasing behaviour. But the survey gives us an indication of how these products may be accepted and what product development and marketing approaches are likely to be most successful.”

‘Functional food’ promise

Studies have confirmed that beef and dairy products contain natural CLA, and these natural levels may be increased substantially through simple livestock production approaches such as using more pasture feed and oils or oilseeds in cattle diets.

“CLA is showing great potential as a basis for new ‘functional food’ beef products,” says Cash. A functional food is defined as any food that has demonstrated



physiological benefits or reduces the risk of chronic disease beyond what are considered normal nutritional functions.

Functional foods represent one of the fastest growing food categories worldwide, with omega-3 enhanced dairy and poultry products a leading example of success for this category in the livestock product sector.

Gauging consumer interest

To gauge consumer interest in potential CLA rich beef products, Cash and colleagues developed a computer-based in-store survey, designed to be consumer friendly and limit bias. One component of this survey included a computer simulation of a shopping experience, asking consumers to make selections on ground beef based on different variables such as price, color, fat level and CLA content label.

The overall survey unveiled a range of key findings:

Preference for ‘CLA rich. In one key result, survey responses indicated a preference for the label “Rich in CLA” compared to the label “CLA enhanced.” “It may

be that the term ‘rich’ is a better fit with attractiveness of CLA as a natural component, while ‘enhanced’ may seem too artificial,” says Cash.

Willingness to pay more. Survey respondents also showed a strong willingness to pay a premium for products with a label denoting high CLA content. Compared to the price of normal beef products, this included a willingness to pay an additional \$2.83/ kg to \$2.96/kg for a product with a “CLA-enhanced” label and an additional \$3.29/kg to \$3.97/kg for a product with a “Rich in CLA” label.

“While the specific numbers may not exactly represent future market premiums for these types of products, the main thing is that the results show a clear willingness to pay more,” says Cash. “Those most willing to pay more included shoppers at higher end grocery specialty stores, shoppers with children, label readers and those with health concerns.”

Regular beef eaters most interested. Among consumers most interested in buying beef with higher CLA content were regular beef eaters, regular label readers, and consumers who find product claims credible.

"My guess is regular beef eaters like higher CLA because it represents a new, positive aspect of something they already enjoy," says Cash. "CLA represents an argument for keeping beef in their diet and having the comfort they're consuming a product with an additional healthy component they didn't know about before."

Food safety connection. Also included in the "most interested" category were consumers who say food safety is important. "The food safety connection was interesting since we didn't directly tie CLA products to food safety in our information," says Cash. "This may be a crossover in positive association related to the enhanced positive health image of the product."

Specialty stores key target. Results also showed those willing to pay the highest premium for products with increased CLA were shoppers at higher end specialty food stores.

"It's not surprising that consumers at specialty stores are likely to be most interested in paying more for novel products," says Cash. "That was our hypothesis and it was certainly born out in the survey results." Despite this assumption, getting confirmation with the survey was very important, notes Cash. "There's always the danger these more discerning consumers could be more sceptical about aspects of new products, so we wanted to see if there was anything that we were telling them that may draw a negative response."

Potential 'back to basics' challenge. A relatively minor yet somewhat surprising finding was that some respondents most interested in nutrition were less interested in products with higher CLA.

"We may have been picking up a 'back to basics' mentality, where some consumers rating nutrition highly not necessarily interested in functional foods; they are more sceptical of anything that could be perceived as less natural or as a silver bullet," says Cash. "The good news is that CLA is a natural component. So this may just be a matter of continually emphasizing and explaining that fact in marketing programs."

Views on labeling, regulation

The broader study effort related to the survey also included focus group approaches to gauge consumer perceptions related to labelling and regulation.

"CLA products have potential for labelling recognitions that could be important to marketing efforts," says Cash. "But the regulations required to use labels and introduce 'novel' functional food products can be time consuming and expensive. So having an idea of how those elements are perceived by consumers is important to the overall development and marketing strategy for CLA products."

Products that represent a "high bar" in regulatory standards are typically associated with aspects such as credible health claims. Products representing a "low bar" have the advantage of a quicker process, but may be associated with more products and less consumer confidence in those products.

"The high bar may be what you'd prefer to present to the consumer, but it means great expense and years instead of months in process, looking at another option or a two-tier approach is something to consider," says Cash.

Results generally indicated that consumers preferred a higher bar approach. "Most people were not opposed to a strict regulatory process because they believed it would guarantee things," says Cash.

Founded in 2001, the CLA Network is a collaborative team focused on harvesting the health potential of CLA. It includes members from academia, industry and government, from many areas of expertise such as research, food industry, health and communications.

Learn more

For more information on the CLA Network, visit www.CLANetwork.com or email: CLANetwork@gov.ab.ca.



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