

Gut check: New food claims aim for digestive health

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McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

LEXINGTON, Ky. — It's not all in your head. These days, it's all in your gut.

Twenty years ago, oat bran was the food that was going to put us all into a state of high-fiber, clear-hearted bliss.

Now the food trend is lower in the body. You want to be healthy in 2008? Ponder your intestines.

Dannon sells Activia yogurt, which promotes bathroom regularity. It also hawks mini-smoothies called DanActive, that claim to boost immunity. You didn't know? Much of your immunity lies in the foot after foot of epithelial cells lining your intestines — a kind of spongy exchange center where nutrients are absorbed and wastes are expelled.

Kraft sells "probiotic" cheese and cottage cheese. Planters has introduced a "digestive health mix" that includes "prebiotic" high-fiber items including granola, almonds and dried cherries.

There's even a new book, "Health Begins in the Colon" (Ulysses Press, \$19.99) by Edward Group. Says Group of his epiphanic moment: "I never hear anything in the medical community about the intestinal tract."

Group says part of our problem, not to put too fine a point on it, is transit time: how long it takes for what you ingest to do its body business and exit you. People in good health should have a bowel movement two or three times a day, Group says. An ideal transit time for food to get in, break down and be on its way? Ten to 18 hours.

PLEASE SEE GUT, 2C

The soluble fiber in oatmeal might help lower levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol.

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To get an idea of how the intestines work, Group says,

consider mixing up everything you eat and drink in a day and smearing it on your skin: After a few hours, it's going to get pretty vile.

That's the other part of the intestinal-health equation: urging the toxins in our food to move on out. Or, with Group's dietary recommendations, never eating them in the first place. He doesn't like laxatives — which he says are drugs — or even psyllium, which he says doesn't repair or cleanse the colon but instead scrapes the intestinal walls a little. He prefers an oxygen-based colon cleanse followed by a diet low in junk and high in fruit.

Then there's Dannon's method of colon overhaul.

Dannon has touted the health benefits of its yogurt as far back as the iconic 1970s commercials that promoted the long-lived yogurt-eating Russian Georgians. Now, Dannon has added Activia and DanActive as specialty products that promote intestinal fortitude from the dairy case.

Where does Activia sell best? Dannon spokesman Michael Neuwirth isn't saying, although he acknowledges that an excretion-encouraging yogurt tends to sell better in regions of the country where poor eating habits predominate.

Dannon's biotically charged yogurts are lifestyle products that produce a benefit — but only if you continue taking them. "You have to consume these products regularly," Neuwirth said. "It's not an on-off switch."

Whether a product is on or off, of course, depends on the consumer. And that's where food fads, as much fashion as science, start.

Oat bran's fall from grace

Dr. James Anderson of the University of Kentucky saw the boom and bust of his favored grain 20 years ago.

One day, oat bran was being added to seemingly every product on the grocery shelf because of its heart-healthy properties. Anderson was dubbed Dr. Oat Bran for his role in popularizing oat bran.

At the height of the oat bran frenzy, a New York baker who couldn't get oat bran described it in terms that made it sound like flaked, fibrous gold: You could charge anything you wanted for it, he said, and people would pay it.

Then, in January 1990, oat bran plummeted from favor. The New England Journal of Medicine said that it wasn't any more effective than wheat fiber. Both worked by displacing other items in the diet. An additional whammy was the suggestion that oat bran caused diarrhea and bloating.

And that was the single moment, the dull thunk, that killed oat bran.

Oat bran pandemonium was less about eating varied and healthy and more about getting the big cool food of the moment. In 1988, that was an oat bran muffin. Now it's anything containing omega-3 oils or probiotics.

In between, there were innumerable superfoods to enthuse about, buy and abandon, among them vitamin E, beta carotene, soy, green tea and "fat-free" formulations that, as the food-villain focus shifted, morphed into "low-carb" foodstuffs.

And why do consumers think they need to flit among foods? Part of the blame gets tossed into the vast blame pit



known as journalism: A 1994 New England Journal of Medicine article by Marcia Angell and Jerome Kassirer argued that reporters and the public were complicit in seeking easy, definitive, permanent answers from scientists who don't have them.

Christine Gerbstadt, a registered dietitian and doctor who works with the American Dietetic Association, knows that the consistent message put forward by her organization — eat a varied diet, exercise and maintain a restrained lifestyle — doesn't resonate with consumers the way food fads do.

She acknowledges the appeal of "natural" products for consumers who like to think there's some lost Valhalla of health down the next grocery aisle — and for business people "trying to make a buck off the latest buzz product."

We don't like complexity and fluid knowledge. We want to live longer, and we have little patience with complicated ideas about how to get there: They're boring.

We want our prescription for health to be peppy, easy and available in a word — two at most.

Hence: "oat bran," "low fat," "low carb." And now, "digestive health."

What's vexing is that some of the food fads eventually are confirmed by additional research. The University of Kentucky's Anderson says additional studies have proved that he was right after all: Oat bran is good for your heart. Being right might not bring back the oat bran-enhanced tortilla chip, but Anderson is gratified nonetheless. Regular consumption of oats changes the intake of lipid particles in the blood, he says. Oats have anti-inflammatory effects, and

hardening of the arteries is an inflammatory process. Oats are rich in anti-oxidants, help lower blood pressure and help in weight management.

But these are complex concepts. "Oat bran equals good" played better at the grocery store.

Colon confusion

Of course, marketing to your intestinal tract is hard: It's tough to distinguish between prebiotic (more fiber) and probiotic (more bacteria). And there's the gross-out factor in any detailed discussion of colon cleanliness.

Beth Loiselle, who offers nutritional counseling at Lexington, Ky.'s Good Foods Market and is the author of "The Healing Power of Whole Foods" (HealthWays Nutrition, \$24.95), says that natural health products have a part in a balanced diet but that consumers have to be wary of putting all parts of diet and supplementation in the context of a thoughtful, varied eating plan.

"All of these things are important, but when people hear a little bit and just do one thing and don't look at their overall diet I that's not going to help them," she says.

She urges clients to eat more whole grains, cut back on sugar and make sure they eat some protein with each meal. Loiselle believes in "real food" with as little processing as possible, and lots of vegetables.

Even Anderson, the lord of oat bran, is a little skeptical of the "digestive health" boomlet. How, he asks, can you measure increased intestinal efficiency?

"Cholesterol is easy to measure I but if you want to enhance the immune system, it's sort of tricky," he says. "What do you measure? Cho-

lesterol is a strong predictor of heart disease, but there are no strong predictors of immune function."

Anderson himself watches calories and limits his consumption of even heart-healthy foods such as almonds. But even Dr. Oat Bran has a sweet tooth: He likes antioxidant-rich dark chocolate, and sometimes he will pop a few pieces of milk chocolate, too.

Even the man who saw his star rise and fall and rise again on oat bran research finds reason to listen to some research studies on other foods: "I was really pleased with the emerging research on dark chocolate."

