

# How are consumers thinking about digestive health? Hartman Group weighs in

By Elaine Watson [↗](#)

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**For some consumers, digestive health is about avoiding foods that make them feel bloated or lethargic, for some, it's about 'roughage' and 'regularity,' while for others it's about keeping their guts happy with prebiotics and probiotics, says Hartman Group.**



Speaking to FoodNavigator-USA for our special edition on digestive health, Hartman Group SVP Shelley Balanko, PhD, said: *"Digestive health has become a more mainstream concern in recent years, but the way in which it affects choices consumers make when they go shopping or eat out in restaurants depends on how engaged they are in their own health and wellness.*

*"There's a continuum of involvement. Folks that are on the periphery of health and wellness are more likely to think about digestive health in terms of regularity and transit as well as energy levels: 'If I eat certain foods I feel sluggish and low in energy or constipated.' Some consumers are also avoiding food and beverage categories they think could cause digestive discomfort such as dairy or overly processed wheat products."*

She added: *"For a huge CPG brand that's talking to the mainstream consumer, I think it makes a lot of sense to link digestive health to energy, whereas smaller brands with unique ingredients targeting more engaged consumers, we'd say yes, absolutely, talk about the relationship between healthy digestion and the health of the microbiome."*

## Grain-free, Paleo

The grain-free movement – which is connected to the Paleo trend – is partly about digestive health for some consumers, she said (although avoiding grains is not something most nutritionists recommend, click [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)).

*"Some consumers are also thinking about eating more healthy fats and reducing sugar and seeking sweetness from ingredients that are less compromising to the microbiome."*

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In general, more engaged consumers *“are thinking more holistically about the gut microbiome and brain function, systemic inflammation in the body and so on,”* she claimed.

**Low FODMAPs**

While the low FODMAPs diet looked at one point that it might be the *“next gluten-free,”* said Dr Balanko, *“It hasn’t taken hold in mainstream circles yet, although we’re monitoring it and waiting to see how it plays out.”*

**Fibers, wholegrains, probiotics, ginger, mint, chamomile, collagen, botanicals...**

Asked about specific ingredients or claims consumers are looking for when it comes to digestive health, she added: *“I’d say at the most basic level, they are thinking about fibers, whole grains and probiotics.”*

*“Protein did edge ahead of fiber as the top ingredient that consumers are seeking to add to their diets for a couple of years, but as of 2017, fiber was back at the top of the list again.”*

She added: *“Some more engaged consumers are looking at ginger, mint, chamomile and certain botanicals associated with digestion, and some are looking for collagen and prebiotics, although it’s a very niche interest right now.”*

**Fermented foods and probiotics**

While there’s no doubt that a growing numbers of consumers are interested in foods fortified with probiotics and prebiotics, they also like the idea of foods that *naturally* contain gut friendly ingredients, which presents the food industry with something of a challenge, especially in the fermented foods arena, said Dr Balanko.

At trade events such as Expo West and KombuchaKon, for example, some brands made a virtue of the fact that they don’t add ‘lab-grown’ probiotics to their fermented foods and beverages, while other brands that do add well-documented probiotic strains to their products argued that this is the only way to ensure consumers are getting products that deliver the claimed probiotic effects.

*“Consumers want authenticity and nutrition that comes from a traditional fermentation process and they are seeking out fermented foods and beverages - yogurts, kefir, kombucha, sauerkraut and kimchi - for improved digestion,”* said Dr Balanko. *“They want foods with inherent functionality and not ‘lab-created’ functionality, but at the same time they are also becoming more precise about the kinds of probiotics that they want.”*

Companies making generic claims about 'probiotics' on labels or websites without knowing which probiotic strains are in their products (benefits are strain-specific, so this matters) or whether they reach the large intestine in sufficient amounts to confer a health benefit could also land in legal hot water, she said.

*"I can see this being an issue in the future as more consumers get educated about probiotics and start asking more detailed questions about what probiotics are in the products."*



### What 'clean' food cues are shoppers looking for?

Consumers are looking for cues signaling 'clean' and 'natural', but they don't necessarily expect to see those words on food labels, and may even be suspicious of brands that use them on pack, says Hartman Group.

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