

Future of gut health trends, research and consumer demand

28 March 2025 | News

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Gut health is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of overall well-being, influencing digestion, immunity, metabolism, and even mental health. The gut microbiome, composed of trillions of beneficial bacteria, plays a vital role in breaking down food, absorbing nutrients, and protecting against harmful pathogens.

With scientific advancements shedding light on the gut-brain connection and the impact of diet on microbiome balance, consumers are actively seeking ways to improve their digestive health. Functional ingredients like prebiotics have emerged as key players in this space, promoting beneficial bacteria and enhancing overall gut function. Christian Philippsen, Managing Director at BENEIO Asia Pacific shared his thoughts on gut health.

Why is gut health so crucial for overall well-being?

Gut health plays a fundamental role in overall well-being, influencing digestion, immunity, metabolism, and even mental health. The gut is home to trillions of bacteria that help break down food, absorb nutrients, and protect against harmful pathogens.

About 70 per cent of the immune system resides in the gut, making a balanced microbiota essential for a strong immune defence. An imbalance in gut bacteria has been linked to chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. Maintaining a healthy gut through a diet rich in fibre and prebiotics is key to long-term health.

How do ingredients like prebiotics impact gut health?

Prebiotics are non-digestible fibres that nourish beneficial gut bacteria, helping them thrive. They support digestive balance, improve regularity, and enhance nutrient absorption. Prebiotics also contribute to immune function and overall metabolic

health.

They play a crucial role throughout life—from the early stages when the gut and immune system are starting to mature, to the later years when the immune system naturally declines with age. Chicory root fibre, one of the most studied prebiotics, has been shown to positively impact gut microbiota, reinforcing its role in a healthy diet.

BENEO is known for its focus on functional ingredients — what role do your products play in supporting digestive health?

BENEO's portfolio includes scientifically backed ingredients designed to support gut health. First and foremost, for digestive health, BENEO's chicory root fibres—Orafti® Inulin and Oligofructose—are natural prebiotics that stimulate beneficial bacteria, aiding digestion and improving overall microbiome balance. Over 25 years of scientific research on these prebiotics has established a comprehensive database of knowledge, highlighting their benefits for digestive health. Intense research related to the gut microbiome over the past 10 years and its importance for human health also helps to add to the prebiotic knowledge database, and new innovative research is continuously emerging.

For instance, a published systematic literature review with meta-analyses explored the effects of inulin-type fructans derived from chicory root and revealed that chicory root fibre intake (starting at 3g/day) promotes significant growth of beneficial bifidobacteria in the gut microbiome in all age groups and improves bowel function parameters.

Apart from prebiotics, BENEO also offers the wholegrain flour Orafti® Î²-Fit, made from barley and containing 20 per cent beta-glucans. With a total fibre content of 40 per cent (inclusive of beta-glucans), it promotes digestive health by supporting bowel regularity and gut microbiota for enhanced nutrient absorption—essential for maintaining vitality as we age. Beta-glucans are also not digested by human enzymes in the small intestine but are completely fermented by the microbiota in the colon. Adding this beta-glucan-rich flour to meals, it is a smart way to easily elevate digestive health by promoting bowel regularity and supporting gut microbiota for enhanced nutrient absorption.

Can you explain the difference between prebiotics and probiotics, and why both are important?

Prebiotics are undigestible in the small intestine. When reaching the large intestine, they serve as food for particular health-promoting microorganisms, such as Bifidobacteria. That way, the beneficial bacteria such as Bifidobacteria, multiply in greater numbers.

Probiotics are live microorganisms generally taken orally. To gain their beneficial effect, probiotics need to maintain their potency as they pass through the stomach and reach the small intestine undamaged to arrive alive in the large intestine.

With a rising understanding of the benefits of the different —biotics,— the demand for synbiotics (combinations of pro- and prebiotics) will most probably increase. In line with more personalised nutrition, the field of precision prebiotics is also interesting. Here we are talking about specific prebiotic fibres that selectively feed groups of gut microbes established to be important components of a healthy gut.

What are some common misconceptions people have about gut health?

A common misconception, for example, is that having a bowel movement every single day is necessary for good gut health. While daily movements are normal, it is also completely healthy for individuals to experience them three times a week. Regularity varies from person to person, and a healthy gut is defined more by consistency and ease rather than strict frequency.

Another widespread myth is the effectiveness of juice cleanses for gut health. They are often marketed as a way to detoxify the body and promote weight loss. However, these cleanses typically lack essential nutrients needed for digestive health, and many juices are high in sugar. Juicing fruits and vegetables also reduces fibre content—an essential component that feeds beneficial gut microbes and helps regulate bowel movements.

Additionally, there is a common misconception that high-fibre foods have an unpleasant taste or texture. In reality, prebiotics are soluble fibres that can be easily incorporated into a wide range of food products, including dairy, cereals, baked goods, and confectionery, without affecting the overall taste. Chicory root fibres, for instance, have a mild natural sweetness and fat-mimicking properties that allow for sugar and fat reduction in food formulations. This enhances the nutritional profile of foods while increasing fibre content, making it possible for manufacturers to create gut-friendly products that do not compromise on taste.

How does a healthy gut contribute to immunity, energy levels, and mood?

A well-balanced gut supports multiple aspects of health beyond digestion.

Beneficial gut bacteria play a crucial role in immune defence by lowering gut pH, creating an environment that discourages harmful bacteria from thriving. They also produce antimicrobial substances that fight off pathogens, preventing them from colonising the gut. Additionally, prebiotic chicory root fibres, such as inulin and oligofructose, support immunity by improving bifidobacteria levels, counteracting the negative effects of antibiotics on gut microbiota, reducing inflammation, and enhancing antibody responses after vaccination.

Beyond immunity, gut bacteria influence brain function and mood through the gut-brain axis. The gut and brain communicate via nerve connections and signalling molecules, with gut bacteria producing metabolites that impact neurological function. Research has shown that dietary fibres like oligofructose can promote beneficial gut microbiota, leading to improvements in mood and reductions in anxiety and depression. A recent study by Jackson et al. demonstrated that oligofructose intake significantly increased bifidobacteria levels and positively influenced mood in adults experiencing mild to moderate anxiety and depression[1]. These findings add to growing evidence supporting the gut's role in emotional and cognitive health.

What trends are you seeing in consumer awareness and demand for gut health products?

Consumers increasingly recognise the connection between diet, gut health, and mental wellness, and more individuals are prioritising digestive health (49 per cent), mental well-being (51 per cent), and good sleep (54 per cent) as part of a holistic approach to wellness[2].

Research further shows that 52 per cent of global consumers actively seek foods and beverages that enhance mood. We can see that mental well-being is becoming a rising star in consumer preferences within the food and beverage industry, and BENEEO is closely monitoring this trend. Globally, 63 per cent of consumers associate mental well-being with holistic health, and more than 1 in 3 prioritise their mental and emotional health to live healthier lives[3].

Prebiotic ingredients such as inulin and oligofructose are well-positioned for products addressing gut health and benefits beyond. Scientific evidence shows that these fibres promote beneficial gut bacteria, which in turn impact mood and overall well-being. As awareness of the gut-brain connection grows, manufacturers have an opportunity to develop innovative products that cater to both digestive and mental health.

How does BENEEO ensure the effectiveness and safety of its gut health-focused ingredients?

Scientific validation is at the core of ingredient development at BENEEO. Our gut health-focused ingredients, including prebiotic chicory root fibres, are backed by decades of research demonstrating their benefits for digestive health, immunity, and overall well-being. Through the BENEEO Institute, we collaborate with independent research institutions, conduct rigorous clinical studies, and adhere to global regulatory standards to ensure both safety and efficacy.

A key example is BENEEO's chicory root fibres, Orafit® Inulin and Oligofructose, which have been extensively studied and recognised globally. These prebiotic fibres are extracted through a gentle hot water process, preserving their natural benefits. They are among the very few prebiotics acknowledged by leading international experts, such as the International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics (ISAPP).

China's largest professional nutrition body, the Chinese Nutrition Society, has also identified inulin and oligofructose as among the first accepted prebiotics, while Indonesia's National Agency of Drug and Food Control has approved them as the first and only officially recognised prebiotics in the country.

Could you share any recent research or innovations from BENEEO in the area of gut health?

BENEEO continues to drive innovation in gut health research, with recent studies highlighting the powerful role of functional ingredients in weight management and metabolic health.

One of the latest studies, conducted by Reimer et al., reinforces the link between gut health and weight management. The research found that consuming prebiotic chicory root fibres selectively increased beneficial gut bacteria and, over time, led to significant reductions in body weight, BMI, fat mass, and waist circumference in individuals who were mostly overweight or obese[4]. With obesity being a major risk factor for diet-related non-communicable diseases, and the number of adults living with obesity in Southeast Asia projected to rise by more than 300 per cent between 2010 and 2030 to 37.3 million adults—these findings are particularly relevant[5]. They demonstrate that chicory root fibres, such as inulin and oligofructose, can be effective components of science-backed solutions for weight management.

When talking about weight management, a recent study led by Prof. Andreas Pfeiffer (Zhang et al.) explored the benefits of BENEÔ's naturally sourced, smart carbohydrate Palatinose® (isomaltulose) on gut hormone release. The study found that Palatinose® stimulates the release of GLP-1, a key hormone involved in appetite regulation and metabolic health, even when consumed before a meal^[6]. This is significant because GLP-1 plays a crucial role in blood sugar control, cardiovascular health, and weight regulation. While GLP-1-mimicking drugs have gained attention for their role in treating Type 2 diabetes and obesity, this research shows that Palatinose® can naturally enhance the body's own GLP-1 response, providing a dietary approach to metabolic health.

These studies underscore BENEÔ's commitment to developing scientifically validated ingredients that support both gut and metabolic health, offering manufacturers opportunities to create functional products that meet growing consumer demand.

What advice would you give consumers looking to improve their gut health through diet and lifestyle?

Gut health is deeply intertwined with overall well-being, influencing not just digestion but also immunity, metabolism, and mental health.

Supporting a healthy gut doesn't have to be complicated—it starts with simple, science-backed choices and a holistic approach that extends beyond diet. While fibre-rich foods and prebiotic ingredients are essential, lifestyle factors like stress management, quality sleep, and physical activity also play a crucial role in maintaining a balanced gut microbiome.

Chronic stress and poor sleep can disrupt the gut-brain axis, impacting digestion and mood, while regular physical activity has been linked to greater microbial diversity in the gut^[7]. Small, sustainable changes—such as incorporating more prebiotic-rich foods, practising mindfulness to manage stress, and prioritising restful sleep—can collectively foster a healthier gut, leading to better digestion, improved mood, and long-term metabolic benefits.

^[1] Jackson PPJ, Wijeyesekera A, Williams CM, Theis S, van Harselaar J, Rastall RA, (2023) Inulin-type fructans and 2-α-fucosyllactose alter both microbial composition and appear to alleviate stress-induced mood state in a working population compared to placebo (maltodextrin): the EFFICAD Trial, a randomized, controlled trial. The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. Published 29 August 2023, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajcnut.2023.08.016>

^[2] FMCG Gurus Health and Wellness Report 2023

^[3] Innova Lifestyle & Attitudes Survey 2023

^[4] Reimer RA, Theis S, Zanzer YC. The effects of chicory inulin-type fructans supplementation on weight management outcomes: systematic review, meta-analysis and meta-regression of randomized controlled trials. Am J Clin Nutr. 2024 Sep 21:S0002-9165(24)00751-2. doi: 10.1016/j.ajcnut.2024.09.019. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 39313030.

^[5] <https://www.worldobesity.org/news/world-obesity-atlas-2025-majority-of-countries-unprepared-for-rising-obesity-level>

^[6] Zhang J. et al (2024); Isomaltulose Enhances GLP-1 and PYY Secretion to a Mixed Meal in People With or Without Type 2 Diabetes as Compared to Saccharose. Molecular Nutrition and Food Research. 68(4):e2300086, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38332571/> (online since 08/02/2024)

^[7] Varghese S, Rao S, Khattak A, Zamir F, Chaari A. Physical Exercise and the Gut Microbiome: A Bidirectional Relationship Influencing Health and Performance. Nutrients. 2024 Oct 28;16(21):3663. doi: 10.3390/nu16213663. PMID: 39519496; PMCID: PMC11547208.