

Food as medicine on display at I.F.T.

*Fresh, clean label are the current areas of R.&D. focus, but a shift may be under way.*

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KANSAS CITY – Much has been written of late about how consumers are flocking to the perimeter of grocery stores to buy more foods that are perceived as fresh and natural. Lost amid the focus on fresh products and the development of cleaner labels are the strides being made in nutrition science to identify the components of foodstuffs that may have medical benefits in terms of prevention or even therapy.

This is a sensitive subject, because the medical field is highly regulated and any company straying into the marketplace must be careful how it communicates the benefits of its ingredients or products it markets. Yet despite the potential pitfalls, a number of exhibitors at the Institute of Food Technologists' annual meeting and exposition, held June 21-24 in New Orleans, offered a glimpse of the innovations that may push some aspects of the food and beverage industry farther into the realm of direct medical benefits.

Blood glucose, or blood sugar, management was a topic that came up in a number of conversations at this year's I.F.T. The focus was primarily on sustained energy and weight management, but offering solutions to consumers who have diabetes or pre-diabetes also came up in conversations. The group of consumers diagnosed with diabetes is large in North America and it is clear companies are seeking to identify solutions that will give them a foothold in the category.

Cognitive health, most notably finding ways to use nutrition as a tool to reduce the potential for cognitive decline later in life, was also a point of discussion. These conversations came on the heels of a report issued by the market research firm Canadean, London, that identified "brain health" as the new frontier in functional food and beverage product development.

Canadean said the cognitive health market is currently dominated by short-term performance boosts, but they are far from the idea of tackling cognitive decline. Making the jump to the prevention of diseases such as dementia is going to be extremely challenging despite the attractiveness of the market, according to the market research firm.

One product identified by Canadean as targeting the brain health market is sold in the U.K. and called Brainwave. The functional beverage features green tea extracts, L-Theanine, and vitamins, ingredients the company claims will keep the mind healthy and reduce the chances of developing Alzheimer's or dementia later in life.

At the forefront of using food and beverages as medicine is Nestle, S.A., Vevey, Switzerland. With the launch

of its Nestle Health Science business unit, the company is placing a significant amount of resources in what Paul Bulcke the company's chief executive officer, called a non-defined market.

"This is a market in the making," he said on June 9 in a meeting with financial analysts. "It is a market about health; health through nutrition.

"We know the best medicine is food and we know the best health keeper is healthy diets and healthy lifestyles. We want to be part of that."

Nestle has identified five platforms its Health Science unit will focus on, including aging, brain health, intensive care, pediatrics and gastrointestinal.

"So you have these platforms, which are just a fraction of the market, but the ones we want to focus on," Mr. Bulcke said. "We have said let's be first and pioneer a position in a market in the making. It's not a clear market; it's not a clear category. There is a lot of dust that needs to settle, but we want to be in the driver's seat."

After spending three days walking the show floor at the I.F.T. exposition it is clear other companies are looking at the food as medicine category and seeking a strong position in the undefined market.

In the short term, fresh, natural and clean label will remain a focus of product development. But given the amount of R.&D. capital being invested in developing ingredients and foodstuffs that have similar benefits to medicines, don't be surprised if that focus begins to shift.