

The whey to go

Whey protein, traditionally recognized for its functionality, has been gaining increased recognition for its nutritional and biological benefits. The low-carb craze/lifestyle brought protein to the forefront of product development, as manufacturers strived to meet the demand for new, innovative, high protein products. Growing research data continues to show that the nutritional profile of whey proteins has increased benefits in comparison to other animal or plant protein sources. As a result, whey proteins have gained increased exposure and consumer acceptance in today's marketplace.

Whey protein encompasses a range of protein fractions that provide different functional and nutritional benefits. The major fractions include alpha-lactalbumin, beta-lactalbumin

and glycomacropeptides. The minor fractions consist of lactoferrin, immunoglobulins and growth factors. A growing amount of scientific evidence reveals that these various bioactive components are capable of improving health and preventing disease. The unique composition of whey proteins provides biological benefits that exceed the properties of a high quality amino acid source.

Major food companies are responding to increasing pressure from the government and consumers concerned about obesity, heart disease and general health. Consumer interest in nutritious, healthy foods has driven much of the research into the healthy effects of whey and whey fractions and the incorporation of whey proteins into many different mainstream food applications.

Some of the health-enhancing properties of whey protein include immune function, antimicrobial action and weight management.

IMMUNE FUNCTION

An important feature of whey proteins is their ability to optimize some key aspects of immune function. Whey proteins appear to modulate immune function by boosting the production of glutathione (GSH). GSH plays an important role in the body's antioxidant defense system and promotes immunity.

ANTI-MICROBIAL ACTION

Lactoferrin, one of the minor fractions, may help the body protect itself against toxins, bacteria and viruses. Lactoferrin is an iron binding protein and acts as an antimicrobial agent. Most recently it has been shown to have a number of other physiological and biological functions that include anti-fungal, antiviral and anticancer activity, wound healing and anti-inflammatory activity.

WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Whey ingredients contain a combination of nutrients that work synergistically and have a positive effect in weight management. Glycomacropeptides are a powerful stimulator of an appetite suppressant hormone, CCK, which plays many essential roles in gastrointestinal function. Whey ingredients are sources of milk minerals, including calcium. Recent clinical and epidemiological studies have shown that optimal dietary intakes of dairy products may promote weight loss. In

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addition, lactose, the sugar in whey ingredients, has a very low glycemic index that helps control hunger and aids weight loss.

Whey proteins' presence in the functional foods segment will only grow stronger as technology advances and research continues to unveil the unique health benefits of its components. From bioactive proteins to essential amino acids and minerals and a range of known functional properties, whey proteins have much to offer in the development and formulation of innovative new product applications for today's health-conscious consumer. The scientific community is increasingly recognizing and recommending the incorporation of whey proteins into consumers' diets to aid in the prevention of disease as well as to protect and improve health. ■

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