

Probiotics: a promising market looking for a better framework in Europe

More and more research has been focused in recent years on the intestinal microbiome and the complex relationship between gut microbiota and other functions of the human body. It is being widely acknowledged that some microorganisms, commonly referred to as probiotics and prebiotics, can play an important role in sustaining a balanced gut microbiota health.

But what are probiotics? Probiotics are live microorganisms that can be formulated into many different types of products, including foods (probiotic yogurt, fermented milk, dairy based products), drugs, and dietary supplements. Probiotics microorganisms are commonly defined as 'live cultures'. So far, the only authorised health claim in the EU is "live cultures of yoghurt improve lactose digestion". This health claim is used in several European countries to indicate the presence of 'probiotics' on product labels and communication of yoghurts, drinking yoghurts and sour milks.

In Europe, the probiotic market has been growing steadily from €8.618,9 million in 2018 to €9.401,6 million in 2021. "Probi-

otic dairy products represent almost 80% of the probiotic market. Consumers enjoy these products in their everyday diet, as part of a balanced and healthy nutrition," points out Alexander Anton, Secretary General of the European Dairy Association (EDA).

The European probiotic supplements market was valued €1.464 million in 2021, close to 25% of the global value. For probiotic yoghurts, plain, flavoured and drinking yoghurts, Europe ranks second in the global scale, after Asia Pacific.

What's in a name?

The word 'probiotic' itself does not convey anything else than a simple "good for you", just like fibre, vitamins and minerals, and it is certainly not a health claim. More than 15 years ago, the European Commission issued a guidance on the implementation of Regulation 1924/2006, which introduced a reference to probiotics by stating that "contains probiotics/prebiotics" should be considered a health claim 'per se'. Nonetheless, the interpretation of the European Commission is today obsolete and did not differentiate between the word encompassing the category and the health



IPA Europe Executive Director Rosanna Pecere and EDA Secretary General Alexander Anton

benefits linked to specific probiotics. The consequence is a misinterpretation of the term 'probiotic', together with the lack of clear and harmonized criteria to qualify a microorganism as 'probiotic'.

EU member states: what is happening here?

As consequence of the lack of clarity on the use of the term 'probiotic' in Europe, some EU countries have in the meantime adopted individual national guidelines or legislations. Italy, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria have issued national guidelines indicating that the wording "contains probiotics" can be used, if specific conditions are fulfilled, as factual information. This was also the case of Spain in 2021.

Other national guidelines have been developed in recent years, and more European countries are flexible in allowing the use of the term probiotic on label and communication of dairy based products, food ingredients and food supplements. The reason for this is to inform consumers and to create equal opportunities for European manufacturers of probiotic foods and dietary supplements, since an increasing variety of probiotics products are advertised and sold online in the European Union and around the world.

Towards an EU harmonised criteria of 'probiotic' definition, communication and labelling

The results of a recent EU survey in 8 countries, commissioned by IPA Europe, show that probiotics are popular, and that people who do not use or buy probiotics also know the term. The survey findings show that EU consumers have high familiarity with the

word 'probiotic', but feel they are not informed about the presence in food and food supplements properly.

79% of the interviewed consumers would like to see the term 'probiotic' indicated on the product (e.g in the ingredients list or on the packaging).

IPA Europe and EDA won't stop requesting the European Commission to consider a way forward that will comply with the EU regulatory framework, providing a clear reference to the use of the term 'probiotic' on labels and in communication, as a description of a food and food supplements category.

"Regulators in other parts of the world recognise the benefits of probiotics under certain conditions and authorise the use of this word for a class of product and ingredients. We believe that a favourable environment for probiotics in Europe will benefit EU citizens and will contribute to cost savings at a societal level," states Rosanna Pecere, Executive Director of IPA Europe.

The clarification of the definition of the term 'probiotic' at European level would enhance the competitiveness of European companies, while providing clearer and more transparent information to consumers.

More information is available here:

<https://www.ipaeurope.org/legal-framework/market-data/w>

