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US urged to increase fiber intake

15/09/2004 - Earlier this week we reported how fiber-enriched products could be the next big thing to hit the US health food market.

Philippa Nuttall spoke to dietician Pat Baird, member of the newly formed National Fiber Council, about the importance of roughage in dietary and supplement form.

The National Fiber Council (NFC) was created this week to address worries that few Americans have enough fiber in their diet.

Pat Baird, one of the health care experts who will sit on the NFC, explained to **NutraIngredientsUSA**, that it has been known for years that Americans do not consume enough fiber. But it is the proliferation of low-carb dieters in recent years that has exacerbated the need for a body such as the NFC. The council says that as consumers on a low-carb diet eat more meat and cut the amount of whole grains, fruit and vegetables they consume, the fiber deficit in the US has been exacerbated.

A study by the Hartman Group recently suggested that more than 20 million Americans are participating in some variation of the low-carb diet.

"One study by the Atkins Center for Complimentary Medicine and published in the American Journal of Medicine in 2002 showed that more than 70 per cent of those on the Atkins diet had suffered constipation as a side effect," said Baird.

Perhaps even more importantly, research has shown that whole-grain foods may protect against cardiovascular disease and may help reduce the risk of colon cancer and diabetes.

The NFC wants initially to get the word out about fiber to healthcare professionals and consumers through the media and education.

"At some point we will no doubt focus on the food industry," said Baird.

Earlier this week the Naples, New York database company Productscan said that the percentage of new food and beverage products making high fiber claims in North America has been stuck at around 2.5 percent for the past four years, but that latest research revealed this figure had increased to 4.2 percent in 2004.

While the NFC would obviously be extremely happy if this trend were to continue, Baird said that she had not seen an increase in consumer awareness of the benefits of fiber.

"In the late 70s and 80s there was lots of reseach about fiber, but in the late 90s this focus got blurred, with consumers concentrating on low-fat products and more recently low-carb foods," she said. *"I think the pendulum is now swinging back to the middle."*

As she pointed out, many young consumers were not around in the 1970s when interest in fiber was last at its height and they therefore need to learn why it is an essential part of a healthy diet.

As this market opens up there is obviously plenty of potential for food manufacturers and supplement makers.

Baird believed that consumers should get their fiber from a variety of sources to make sure they get a mixture of soluble and insoluble roughage. She added that particularly those on a low-carb diet should consider taking fiber supplements.

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"Various health organizations recommend 25 grams – 30 grams a day of fiber a day." said Baird. "This is possible, but people want to start to slowly increase their fiber intake, and supplementation should be considered."