

## NUTRITION MARKET TRENDS

# An Aging Population: Industry Opportunities

**Members of the older demographic seek products that confer health benefits and/or that may prolong the quality of an independent life.**

by Erin DeSimone, MS, RD, LDN, FAND and Haley Hickman, MS, RD

People aged 60 years and older make up the fastest-growing segment of the US population and the food industry has an important role to play during this critical era of people's lives. First and foremost, healthy aging and the prevention of chronic disease is heavily dependent on proper nutrition. There are also significant opportunities for R&D pipelines to help improve the quality-of-life and length of independence of older adults, by addressing the sensory, social and physical changes associated with aging.

### Lessons From Elsewhere

Compared to the US, the older adult populations of many other countries matured earlier. According to UN's "World Population Prospects: 2015 Revisions," the 60-and-

older demographic made up 20.7 percent of the total US population in 2015. To compare, Japan, Germany and Finland reached a 60-and-older population makeup of 23.3 percent, 23.1 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively, in 2000. Reviewing marketing experiences in countries that have already experienced disproportionate growth in the older population could point the way for opportunities in the US.

As John Ruff, retired Kraft executive and past president of the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT), shared in an interview: "Global ideas are a good source when considering food formulations for older adults. Thousands of products are launched every year around the world that target older consumers."

Indeed, marketers in Japan, Germany and Finland provide

numerous examples of how food companies can address the needs of older adults.

In Japan, baby-food maker Kewpie released a 50-item "gentle" product line, aimed at older adults. The vacuum-packed food pouches are labeled by texture, with helpful descriptions such as "no chew," "crushable with tongue," "crushable with gums" and "easy to chew." Wakodo, a formula and feeding company, released its own line of pouched meals for older adults, with flavors including "sweet and sour pork," "rice porridge with globefish" and "hamburger steak with curry sauce."

Outside of Japan, older adults are choosing foods that suit them in the absence of deliberate marketing messages. German baby-food company Hipp, for example, found that one-quarter of the individuals

consuming its products were adults. As a result, the company's profits increased by €90 million from 2009 to 2010 – even with birth rates declining in Germany. This success suggests that there are opportunities to develop a market strategy directly targeting the aging adult population.

### A Research-Based Approach

In Finland, VTT Technical Research of Finland (VTT) initiated a large study consisting of focus groups, taste tests and surveys to determine what type of packaged meals would be preferable for older adults. Results revealed that seniors thought packaged meals did not provide enough nutrition. The study also clarified the taste preferences of older adults and established that packaging needs to be easy to read. The research was completed in 2014 and product development is ongoing for a line of older adult products.

By understanding the aging consumer, food companies can innovate to meet the needs of aging populations in multiple global markets. Initiatives targeted at an overall healthy eating approach rather than individual nutrient segmentation can optimize healthy aging. Marketers can develop educational resources to help translate scientific information into practical resources. And they can directly engage their consumer base by leveraging social media to encourage older individuals to embrace the ag-

Table 1: Percentage of Population Age 60 or Over

Year	2000	2015	2030
Japan	23.3%	33.1%	37.3%
Germany	23.1%	27.6%	36.1%
Finland	19.9%	27.2%	31.5%
United States	16.2%	20.7%	26.1%

Source: United Nations (2015). World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision. (Note: The United Nations classifies the aging population as 60 years or over. The United States Census classifies the aging population as 65 years or over.)



ing process, by adopting effective weight-management strategies, good nutrition, physical activity and a positive attitude.

### Addressing Food Insecurity

The social, economic, physical and psychological changes of aging present opportunities for the food industry to address. According to AARP Foundation's 2014 report, "Findings on Nutrition Knowledge and Food Insecurity Among Older Adults," approximately 10 million older adults are food insecure, meaning they are without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

The report included a survey of 1,000 adults who are 50 and older and earn below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Respondents identified affordable fruits and vegetables, recipe ideas and more time to cook as ways to help them eat more nutritious foods.

Obesity is already one of the fastest growing public-health epidemics, and incidence in older adults is no exception. Food insecurity creates a "double burden" of obesity and hunger. Partnerships across the public and private sector to address this paradox can provide meaningful outcomes in this population.

### A Better Sensory Experience

While the importance of nutrition increases with age, taste acuity drops. The aging process leads to decreased sensory perception, including olfaction (smell), gustation (taste), vision and textural senses. Creating flavorful, nutritious food that

older adults want to eat can be difficult.

"Aging populations rely heavily on prescription medication and more than 250 medications affect smell and/or taste," says Annette Hottenstein, MS, RD, LDN, a sensory scientist and president of The Food Sommelier. "With aging, the ability to taste salty and sweet decline more rapidly than for sour and bitter. That is why many older adults crave sweet and salty foods. The challenge lies in finding the balance between health and taste."

Hottenstein adds: "More than 75 percent of people over the age of 80 have major olfactory impairment. This is not a small problem by any means, and it greatly affects quality of life."

These factors are important as food scientists, product developers and marketers strive to meet the needs and wants of the older demographic. One promising avenue to explore is the addition of herbs and spices to improve the palatability of nutrient-dense foods.

### Supporting Independence

While aging is often associated with isolation and a decrease in social activities, older adults seek products to maintain independence. A recent AARP Foundation report, "50+ Consumer Survey Highlights: Healthy Living and Diet Perceptions, Food Purchasing and Consumption," showed "the desire to be healthy" as a top food choice value. Respondents defined "healthy" as maintenance of physical abilities and avoiding illnesses. Further, the report showed indicators of health shift

across the lifespan. Independence is more valued as a health marker than a healthy weight, as age increases.

"Muscle decline is directly correlated with independence in folks after the age of 60, so it is incredibly important to provide foods with a good source of protein with every meal, evenly distributed throughout the day is ideal for muscle synthesis," says Susie Rockway, PhD, CNS, vice president of research and development at Capital Brands LLC. To further facilitate independence, many older adults will continue to rely on foods that are both convenient and simple to prepare. Manufacturers can assist through portion control and smart packaging. "Easy-to-open, resealable and easy-grip pack is a key purchasing factor," Ruff notes. "Older adults do not want to be reminded that they are old. Products stereotyped to this consumer are being left on the shelf."

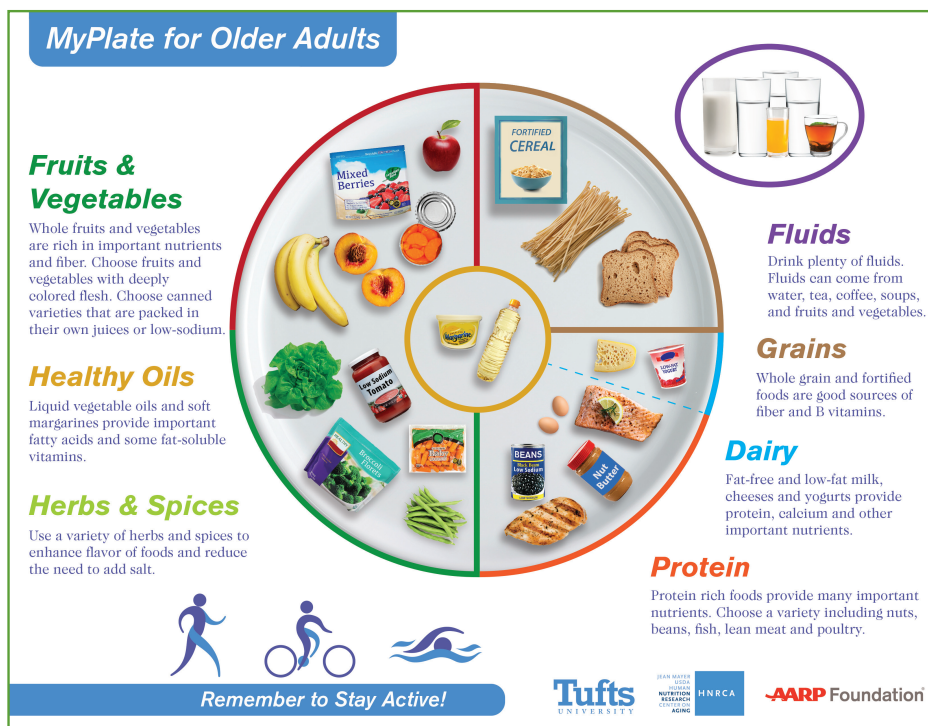
### Supporting Healthy Aging

Increased incidence of sarcopenia and impaired cognitive health are relevant health concerns in the US. Loss of muscle mass is believed to contribute to the frailty and functional disabilities associated with aging. Disability development directly inhibits consumer demands for independence. Treatment and prevention is addressed through a physical activity and nutrition approach. Specifically, adequate protein and energy intake is essential to save skeletal muscle mass. Food manufacturers have an opportunity to address this concern and provide formulation options that confer to a healthy diet. "Protein intake is especially important in the older folks," Dr. Rockway says. "They need an easily digestible protein (whey isolate or pea protein for plant-based version), which can be a key base to any food; be it a bar, snack or ready-to-drink beverage."

Additionally, although age is the strongest risk factor for dementia, Alzheimer's disease is a not a normal part of aging. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can reduce the free radical damage to brain cells, thought to contribute to cognitive decline. Specific nutrient intake, including omega 3 fatty acids may be an avenue to address cognition, by reducing inflammation and oxidation in the brain. Choline is another nutrient that is involved in cell signaling in the brain and is thought to help prevent age-related cognitive decline. Only 1 in 10 Americans get the recommended amounts of choline, which is 550mg/day.

### Regulation Challenges

Regulations may present challenges for new products developed for the aging



population. Many “healthy aging” products feature claims describing the content of a specific nutrient present. Examples include “a good source of calcium,” “high fiber” and “low in saturated fat.” These claims are called “nutrient content claims” and fall under strict FDA regulation.

An alternative approach for food manufacturers to address age-related concerns is through new product development directed toward a whole diet. Products designed to fit a dietary pattern, such as the DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) or MyPlate for Older Adults (see figure on page 56) may offer simpler, easy-to-understand approaches to healthy eating, and can help shift older adults towards healthier diets.

For example, liquid vegetable oil falls within the MyPlate for Older Adults dietary pattern and can contribute to the health promise associated with this pattern. In the US, food products geared toward optimal aging are regulated by FDA in the same manner as other foods. Dietary supplements, such as nutrition shakes, are subject to dietary supplement regulations. In contrast with drugs, manufacturers of foods and dietary supplements are not required to obtain FDA approval before putting their products on the market.

However, apprehension surrounding marketing messages among older consumers and their healthcare providers may result in decreased acceptance of these products. One specific concern falls around the lack of clinical trials to evaluate prescription drug interactions, which underscores the role that purposeful scientific research has in substantiating the risks and benefits of foods marketed to the older demographic is needed.

### Future Implications

The market expansion is just beginning in the US “As affluent boomers pass 70, the opportunities for the food industry with older adults will grow,” Ruff said.

Modifying a food’s taste, texture and marketplace positioning to make it more appealing to aging consumers is a promising business opportunity for food manufacturers worldwide, provided that formulators tap consumer insights and current nutrition science to delineate how any given product fits the needs and preferences of this demographic and supports the adoption of healthy lifestyles. ▼

Erin DeSimone, MS, RD, LDN, FAND, is senior vice president and group lead, and Haley Hickman, MS, RD, is a member of the staff at FoodMinds, a division of PadillaCRT, in Chicago.