

alive report

2007 Natural health highlights

A year of living...naturally | Kai Jansson

Readers of *alive* magazine have long known the benefits of natural health products when used correctly and with the guidance of a health practitioner. This year the Canadian public's interest and knowledge of natural health and the products associated with it has increased to an all-time high.

In a 2005 poll by Health Canada on awareness of natural health products—defined as “vitamins and minerals, herbal remedies, homeopathic medicines, traditional medicines such as traditional Chinese medicines, probiotics, and other products such as amino acids and essential fatty acids”—71 percent of Canadians said they have used at least one natural health product.

That figure has increased since earlier years and has likely continued to increase in the two years since the poll was conducted. The same poll revealed that 69 percent of Canadians want more information about natural health products, and 84 percent of those polled believe that Canadians need to be better informed about the safe use of natural health products.

Certainly public interest in natural health products, functional foods, and organic products has risen dramatically over the past decade. This fact is evidenced by the rise in demand for natural health products that use nonpharmaceutical, traditional herbal remedies and for organic products in grocery stores.

For example, consumers now recognize the connection between diet and disease, and they are more likely to choose products such as bread and yogourt that have been fortified with probiotics over those that have not.

Even as consumer awareness of natural health products increases, confusion over the status and safety of those products has increased concurrently, as indicated in a survey of Canadian newspapers over several months early this year. Several urge caution over the use of natural health products, and some make stronger allegations about health supplements.

How should the average consumer interpret these contradicting claims about natural health products and organic foods? Fortunately, Health Canada—recognizing that preventive health benefits our overburdened health care system—has stepped up to the plate.

Organic foods regulations

New federal regulations on organic foods were released in December 2006 to institute a national standard on

organic products. Those products that meet the new standards will be permitted to use the Canada Organic label.

While British Columbia and Quebec have long had provincial standards, federal regulations were sorely needed to ensure that both imported organic products and those grown across Canada meet the same standard. All Canadian organic food producers must meet that standard by the end of 2008.

To assist its own organic producers to adapt to that new federal standard, the BC government has granted \$100,000 in aid to the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia.

Canada's Food Guide

In February Health Canada released the first new edition of *Canada's Food Guide* since 1992, which now acknowledges the usefulness of some supplements. Its recommendation that men and women over 50 should take a daily vitamin D supplement in consultation with health care practitioners was supported, in June, by the Canadian Cancer Society and the Canadian

Dermatology Association, citing a US study that indicated vitamin D reduces the risk of cancer by 60 percent.

Health Minister Tony Clement added in a press release, "One important new feature of this *Food Guide* is that it now offers Canadians information on the amount and types of food recommended for their age and gender." The new *Food Guide* appropriately recommends daily multivitamin supplements containing folic acid for all women of childbearing age and multivitamins with iron for women who are pregnant.

While the Canadian Health Food Association (CHFA) applauded Health Canada's recognition of the usefulness of supplements, they also encouraged the government to go further, citing as an example studies indicating the benefits of the daily use of omega-3 fatty acids, flaxseed, and folic acid on the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease.

Penelope Marrett, CHFA's president and CEO, added, "The confirmation provided by *Canada's Food Guide* of the role supplements play in promoting and maintaining good health and preventing chronic disease should provide impetus to all levels of government to fund research into the health benefits and health care cost savings of regular supplement use.

"In addition, the CHFA encourages all levels of government to investigate tax incentives to encourage self-care through healthy eating and supplement use and would like to see a commitment from government to support research on the benefits of natural products," Marrett said.

Natural Health Products Regulations

The Natural Health Products Directorate (NHPD), a branch of

Health Canada, introduced the Natural Health Products Regulations in 2004 to assist consumers by ensuring that all natural health products sold in Canada were safe, were supported by evidence, held the same ingredients they listed, and followed Good Manufacturing Practices guidelines. These regulations apply to both domestic and imported natural health products.

The NHPD is currently reviewing about 50,000 natural health products for a self-imposed 2010 deadline. While some critics have alleged that the 2010 deadline is unrealistic, the NHPD continues to work carefully sifting through the many diverse natural health products to methodically check their claims.

Anne Wilkie, CHFA's vice president explains, "The level of evidence required to back up claims depends upon the strength of the claim and can range from traditional references to double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trials; regardless of the type of evidence submitted, it must be reviewed and accepted by the federal government before a product license is issued."

A review of the Natural Health Products Regulations themselves was undertaken in 2006 with the consultation of many interested parties, including the CHFA acting as a representative body for most of the Canadian natural health food industry. In 2007 Health Canada continued the review process, holding further consultations online, and in the summer of 2007 they also began consultations on regulations for veterinary natural health products.

CHFA also created a health awareness initiative focused on health promotion and disease prevention. November 2007 was National Health Food Month, which had as its theme

Canadian Health Food Association

Founded in Vancouver in 1964, the Canadian Health Food Association (CHFA) is Canada's largest national trade organization for the natural health products industry. Its members include more than 85 percent of Canada's natural health products retailers, suppliers, wholesalers, distributors, and manufacturers, including *alive* magazine.

The CHFA works to support the natural health industry by ensuring that the regulatory environment remains fair. Its scope has increased in the decades it has existed as scientific and public awareness of natural health products has grown.

The CHFA hosts three trade shows, Expo West in Vancouver and Expo East in Toronto, both held annually, and Expo Quebec, held biennially. These trade shows are the largest of their kind in Canada, informing retailers and practitioners about the newest products and latest developments in the industry. See chfa.ca for more information.

"Celebrate Your Health Naturally!"
Now that's a theme we should keep in mind as we enter 2008. **a**

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