

GLP-1 and the impact on the food industry



Orange, lemon, lime and grapefruit flavours pair well in formulations that contain a sugar substitute

Over the last few years Glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) medications like Ozempic have taken the world by storm. The Kaiser Family Foundation reported that 12% (one in eight) of people in the U.S. are currently using GLP-1 medications for weight loss, with this number estimated to continue growing.

Originally used by individuals with type-2 diabetes, these medications have become the new strategy for individuals who want to lose weight. Glucagon-like peptide-1 is a natural gut hormone, and its mode of action is to stimulate the release of insulin which results in the reduction of blood sugar. It slows down digestion, resulting in reduced hunger and ultimately weight loss.

Importantly, based on the current projections, GLP-1 usage is not just a trend, but a complete shift in consumer behaviour and demand. The typical GLP-1 user is seeking healthier foods and moving away from highly processed, sugary foods, opting for healthy, nutritious, low calorie and functional foods. It has also been reported that customers purchasing behaviours have changed, with 39% of consumers on GLP-1 purchasing less food. These consumers purchase with more intent and don't purchase impulsively. They are also willing to spend more on smaller portion sizes that meet all their nutritional and functional needs. Ultimately, their purchasing decisions come down to choosing products that deliver complete nutrition and functionality in a

compact serving, without compromising on taste or flavour. One must remember that the GLP-1 consumer still wants an enjoyable eating experience. In fact, the latest trends indicate food choices are driven by appeal and enjoyment such as an indulgent experience in terms of superior taste and texture while providing nutritional benefits.

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Brands need to adapt to the trends and develop products that appeal to the GLP-1 consumer. It has become evident that lighter and gentle texture type foods are preferred over dense foods as the latter

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could result in digestive side effects. Furthermore, the consumer wants guilt-free nutritional indulgence in terms of taste and texture. This can become a tricky road for a product developer to tick multiple boxes. This has various implications, e.g. reformulation, changes to nutritional values, or adjusted serving sizes.

The most challenging aspect in formulating for the GLP-1 consumer palate is the changes that have been reported regarding their overall sensory perception. GLP-1 users may experience changes in mouthfeel and taste, making some flavours more difficult to detect and others more pronounced. Reports have indicated consumers experience increased sensitivity to sweetness, reduced appetite for fatty foods, bitterness and off-notes perceived with greater intensity in addition to “dry-mouth” in general. Furthermore, changes in texture perception e.g. dense, dry, chalky, or gritty textures are often less well tolerated. Although it is yet to be identified why this phenomenon is happening, it is believed to be a combination of physiological, neurological, and sensory effects of the GLP-1 receptor agonists rather than changes to the taste buds alone.

The GLP-1 consumer has a very strong preference for foods with added nutritional and digestive benefits such as high protein, vitamins, minerals and added fibre. The number one nutritional benefit for individuals who want to lose weight is reduced or low sugar in foods. The latter however requires a sugar substitute like sweeteners to still make it taste appealing. With sugar substitutes already perceived by many as quite sweet but tolerable, the GLP-1 user could perceive it as being overwhelming, resulting in a product that is too sweet to consume for their liking.

GLP-1 users are actively seeking foods that are higher in protein to help preserve lean muscle mass during weight loss and support overall metabolic health. As these medications reduce appetite and food intake, protein-rich foods provide a nutrient-dense option that helps meet nutritional requirements while contributing to satiety and functional health. Dairy

protein remains the preferred protein source, with products such as Greek yoghurt, drinking yoghurts, cottage cheese, kefir and protein-enriched milk beverages being very popular. These products are small enough to consume, while being nutrient dense especially if available with added benefits such as high protein. Innova Market Insights data shows that 48% of consumers prefer milk as their protein source, and the global dairy protein market grew 7% between July 2020 and June 2025, reflecting continued consumer demand for protein-rich dairy products.

Although it is encouraging to the dairy market, what remains difficult is packing enough protein into a product of small serving size without compromising manufacturing capability, stability, texture and most importantly taste. Protein fortification tends to result in a bitter perception as the user has a greater awareness of chalky, gritty or drying textures often associated with high-protein formulations. Manufacturers must therefore balance protein enrichment with flavour modulation and texture

GLP-1 consumers still want an indulgent experience coupled to nutritional benefits



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optimisation to deliver products that remain enjoyable and easy to consume despite these sensory changes.

Lastly, the demand for fibre-rich products creates the challenge of increasing fibre content without compromising taste, texture or digestive tolerance. Product developers must deliver meaningful levels of fibre in smaller serving sizes while maintaining consumer acceptance, especially in terms of texture, making ingredient selection and formulation strategies critical for success.

As the sensory experience is the biggest focus for the GLP-1 user, a lot of emphasis has been placed on flavours. Popular flavours that coincide with the "nostalgic" flavour trend have been the typical

favourites and were seen across all purchasing groups. Nostalgic flavours evoke emotion and reconnect with feel-good memories from the past. These typical nostalgic flavours such as chocolate, vanilla and cinnamon bring back memories of childhood treats and typically provide a sweet aroma without the accompanying sugar. In addition to this, citrus e.g. orange, lemon, lime and grapefruit flavours have been gaining in popularity. The latter pairs well in balancing the sweetness, especially in formulations that contain a sugar substitute that users will find very intense as previously mentioned. Other popular flavours include botanicals such as ginger, mint, spices and floral notes. These flavours are associated with health and wellness as well as refreshment. The combination of citrus with a botanical delivers a bold impactful flavour, while helping balance bitterness or sweetness from the "better-for-you" formulation.

As of now GLP-1 usage is here to stay and will likely continue growing at a rapid pace as it becomes more readily accessible. Manufacturers need to balance taste, nutritional requirements, ingredient functionality and processing capabilities all within the smaller size, which is easier said than done. The industry needs to be able to accommodate this "new consumer" that wants it all – health, wellness and exceptional taste.

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