

Sports nutrition category adapts to changing consumer practices during COVID-19

by Luke Huber and Jim Komorowski

INSIDER's take

- ✦ Even as university-based research has been put on pause, there are opportunities for clinical research to continue.
- ✦ It is important to address the shifting needs of athletes who may be evaluating products with additional health benefits.
- ✦ With new consumers incorporating exercise into a daily routine or rethinking their diets, many are newly motivated to improve their health and wellness.

As COVID-19 became a public health emergency, leading to severe economic impacts and social distancing, Americans have experienced dramatic lifestyle shifts. Whether that means planning virtual happy hours, perfecting the science of grocery delivery or finding a new method of exercise, multiple industries quickly adapted their practices to carry on in a virtual format. The sports nutrition category is no exception as companies engage with sports nutrition consumers in the shifting marketplace and manage new realities in the clinical research sector.

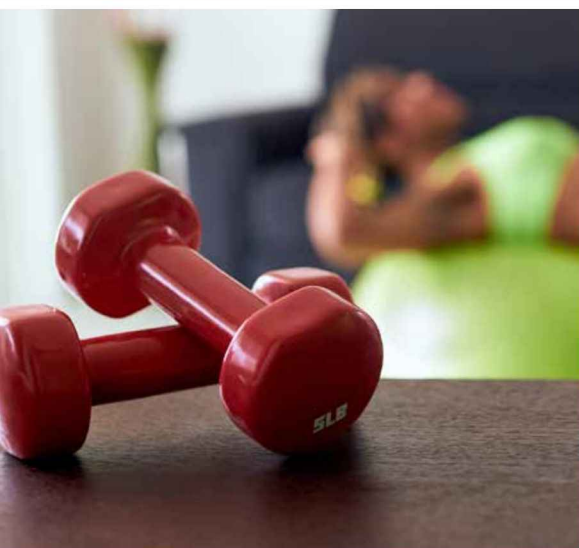
Recently, the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN) hosted a panel discussion about the impact of COVID-19 on sports nutrition during its first Sports Nutrition Working Group (SNWG) meeting of 2020. The panel featured Douglas Kalman, Ph.D., vice president, scientific affairs, Nutrasource, and adjunct professor, Nova Southeastern; and Richard Kreider, Ph.D., professor and executive director, Texas A&M University. The panelists discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the sports nutrition sector through the sudden halt of clinical trials, the need to cater to changing consumer habits and the mandate to seize innovation opportunities.

Kalman and Kreider are both deeply involved in clinical research and were able to share expert perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on sports nutrition research in university and contract research organization (CRO) settings. Universities across the country have closed their campuses. While classes carry on through virtual formats, universities have suspended most person-to-person activities, including ongoing research and clinical trials. Currently, most research trials are only permitted to collect data through online surveys or other virtual formats with strict restrictions on participant contact.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) published suggestions for research facilities to handle these changes and presented an exception to clinical trials that have ongoing medical interventions involving drug trials with patients receiving treatments. Dietary supplements are at a disadvantage, as they cannot legally be used to treat, cure or prevent a disease even when evaluating the impact of certain nutrients on metabolic syndrome or improving health and nutrient status.

However, the panelists recommended that those in the sports nutrition space not become complacent, but progress in the shifting





paradigm. “The smart position is to not withdraw from clinical trials, but to invest in new ideas ... and plan ahead so you can hit the ground running and not be further delayed,” Kreider said. “Take the opportunity to communicate with consumers who are now more interested in exercise and take advantage of activities that will help keep them in the space. There is opportunity even with delay.”

Kalman noted that even with university-based research on pause, there are opportunities for clinical research to continue. “Contract research organizations or centers that are not university or hospital affiliated are able to continue conducting studies as long as they adhere to all state and local laws,” Kalman said. “And even though the number of volunteer participants for non-COVID-19 related studies has temporarily waned during this pandemic, there is no reason to cancel research plans. In fact, this may even be a time to reinforce your commitment to full product development.”

With clinical trials seemingly on pause, there is an opportunity for the whole nutrition industry, including the sports sector, to have an impact on the adapting consumer. The panelists first noted a change in consumers’ exercise habits, both in the rising number of individuals exercising and the types of exercise they are doing. Increase in exercise could be due to a variety of reasons such as finding ways to spend excess time, maintaining mental health, or in some cases, taking this unprecedented time at home to make significant lifestyle changes to better overall health.

As the world confronts this international health crisis, people are considering their own health now more than ever and seeking ways to improve it by changing nutritional habits and incorporating exercise into their everyday routines. Now is the time for the sports nutrition sector to motivate and educate newcomers to stay in the space even after COVID-19 has run its course. Virtual platforms offer the prospect to educate the public on proper nutrition and the role of dietary supplements to promote health and wellness and optimize training.

While there may be newcomers to the space, there are also changing needs for advanced athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditional sports nutrition ingredients like protein and amino acids will likely stay relevant, but it is important to address the shifting needs of athletes who are still serious about training and may be evaluating products with additional health benefits.

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Research demonstrates that intense athletic training may, in some instances, compromise immune health. Elite athletes may be seeking supplements to support their immunity, whether incorporating ingredients into their current diet and supplementation, such as protein smoothies, or adding new supplements into their regimen to help maintain immune health during periods of intense exercise. The panelists also noted the opportunity in this specific space to incorporate more traditional wellness-based supplements into sports nutrition products.

Whether it is through incorporating exercise into a daily routine or rethinking their diets, many consumers are newly motivated to improve their health and wellness. Scientific innovation in the nutrition category may appear to be on hold as many clinical trials are halted and companies consider their next move, but there are still significant opportunities for sports nutrition.

“Don’t abandon your plans for studies because everything is on pause,” Kalman said. “It’s important that the industry promotes valid products that have strong use cases for consumers versus abandoning true R&D as part of your product development.” Sports nutrition consumers, both newcomers and legacy users, are relying on the responsible industry to promote safe and useful products as well as educate on proper nutrition and optimal exercise methods to support their health as they face dramatic changes in lifestyle. ✨



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