

First omega-3 milks in UK target demand for brain food

26/05/2005 - **The first omega-3 milks to hit the UK market will benefit from increasing demand for healthy children's food, following a wave of media reports on research into brain food and the poor quality of school lunches, writes *Dominique Patton*.**

Parents in the UK, bombarded with messages about the dangers of obesity and increasing incidence of type 2 diabetes among children, are becoming a rich opportunity for manufacturers of healthy and functional foods.

The country has one of the highest incidences of childhood obesity in Europe, triggering government investigations into ways of tackling the problem. Most recently, the media spotlight has turned to school meals, with TV chef Jamie Oliver attacking the quality of the food and its lack of nutrients for the brain.

Two new omega-3 milks, both being introduced to the first supermarkets this week, will benefit from this climate, as well as the research – much of it by UK scientists – showing that omega-3 fatty acids help the brain development of young children and can improve behaviour and learning difficulties.

Just this month a trial by Oxford University researchers reported that children taking fish oil supplements for three months showed "significant improvements" in behaviour, reading and spelling.

Dairy Crest, which launched its omega-3 fortified milk St Ivel Advance in Waitrose on Monday, says the product will be marketed towards families with young children, with two glasses of the whole milk variety said to provide 50 per cent of the recommended daily intake of omega-3s.

Meanwhile retailer Marks & Spencer will tomorrow start offering an omega-3 milk under its own label. The group claims that a daily 250ml serving of the new 'Super Whole Milk' contains 48mg of DHA and EPA, or 10 times more of the omega-3 fatty acids than regular milk.

Both products are fresh milks, preferred in the UK, but requiring more complex product development than the omega-3 fortified UHT milk already common in some other markets.

Dairy Crest spent two years developing the new milk that contains an emulsion of fish oils added during the processing. The Marks & Spencer milk is obtained from cows whose feed is fortified with a blend of fish oils.

The preference among UK consumers for fresh milk has resulted in slower development of fortified and functional milks than other European markets. The category generated a mere €0.4 million in sales during 2004 compared to €413.1 million in Spain, or €197.6 million in Italy during the same year, according to Euromonitor data.

A major marketing campaign by Spain's Puleva for its omega-3 milks has driven strong sales in this category but this and other products have also concentrated on heart health.

In the UK, the current interest in 'brain food' could initially be an equally strong driver of sales.

Supermarkets have recently reported an increase in sales of oily fish, peppers, spinach, avocado and blueberries, thought to help children currently doing exams. At Tesco, in the past two months, sales of salmon and tuna have doubled, avocado consumption is up by 30 per cent and blueberries have seen a staggering 131 per cent increase in sales.

Whether these foods can have any impact on exam performance or not, Tesco produce director Peter Durose has described it as "a major new retail movement" that could not be explained simply by summer food sales. The supermarket is now considering introducing a range of 'brain food', according to the *Daily Telegraph*.