

UK body backs health claim for omega-3s

15/03/2005 - **Fish oil supplements and foods fortified with marine-source omega-3 fats on the UK market have gained the scientific go-ahead to promote the heart health benefits of their products.**

The Joint Health Claims Initiative (JHCI), a group of consumer and industry representatives that issues advice on health claims in the absence of regulation in this area, said today that seven leading scientists have approved a heart health claim for long chain omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids.

The news lends further backing to an omega-3 health claim in future European regulation, currently under discussion by MEPs. The US FDA has also approved a health claim for omega-3 fatty acids in foods and supplements.

"I would hope that the European regime would adopt a similar approach and include omega-3s in its list of generic health claims," said Dr Ray Rice, the scientist responsible for gathering evidence for the claim for a consortium of companies and groups interested in omega-3s.

Such a claim would help food manufacturers to promote increased consumption of omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fortified foods and supplements are currently doing well but are restricted by lack of a recommended daily intake and wariness to make health claims.

European omega-3 fatty acids are worth \$195 million (marine oils make up 77 per cent of this), growing by around 8 per cent on average to 2010, according to Frost & Sullivan.

A handful of companies are already making claims for heart health in the UK but many food firms are wary of making claims on their products in the wake of increased scrutiny of the industry by advertising and trading standards authorities.

"Enforcement organizations do work with JHCI and would come to us for guidance," JHCI acting executive director Dr Jennifer Garry told NutraIngredients.com.

The new claim states: *'Eating 3g weekly, or 0.45g daily, long chain omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids, as part of a healthy lifestyle, helps maintain heart health.'*

The UK government has recently recommended consumption of one portion of fish a week for reduced risk of cardiovascular disease but many consumers do not eat fish regularly. *"It is not just promoting fish oil. Hopefully it will increase the number of products fortified with omega-3s that make heart health claims. This will enable us to tackle the estimated two thirds of the population who do not consume fish on a regular basis,"* added Dr Rice.

However Dr Rice noted that the JHCI's guidelines on quantities required before a claim can be used will restrict the number of products that can carry the claim.

"We asked for 75mg per day as the required amount needed to carry a claim. However we have finished up with 200mg. This does restrict the number of potential vehicles containing fish oil because of the extreme fish taste," explained the scientist.

The JHCI has published a number of other guidelines for companies using the claim, and also refers to its code of practice that supports the type of nutrient profiling included in the current draft of European legislation on health claims, which advises that products high in saturated fat, salt or sugar should not carry a claim.

In addition the claim relates only to very long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (of chain length 20 carbons or above) including EPA, DPA and DHA (ie 20:3n-3, 20:4n-3, 20:5n-3, 22:5n-3 and 22:6n-3).

It does not cover alpha-linolenic acid (18:3n-3 and 18:4n-3) because the bulk of evidence on this omega-3 fat suggests it is not as effective in heart protection as fish oils, said Dr Rice.

The only other claims approved by the JHCI are for soya protein, oats and reduced saturated fat (all for their cholesterol-lowering effects) and wholegrain foods' benefits to heart health.