Beyond structure function claims for intestinal and immune health, probiotics are being linked to skin and women’s health, sugar cravings, weight loss, allergy relief, oral health and even depression—the list goes on and is surprising. But manufacturers of probiotic ingredients and supplements are wary not to bank on a miracle supplement. Instead, they are waiting for further scientific confirmation; in the meantime, they are seeing increasingly strong sales and consumer knowledge as an offshoot of big brand advertising and food marketing.

“The probiotic market, globally, is expected to reach $32 billion by 2015, of which nearly $30 billion will be generated through the sale of functional foods and beverages with the largest portion being generated by the sale of drinkable and spoonable yogurt,” noted Michael Bush, vice president of business development with Ohio-based Ganeden Biotech, an ingredient supplier.

“The industry is growing and there are no signs of it slowing down in the near future,” he said, adding that more than 80 percent of consumers recognize the term “probiotic” and associate some sort of health benefit with the category. “Over the past two years the growth has continued, possibly driven by advertising by the major brands and the growth in popularity of probiotic-fortified foods and beverages.”

Sylvia Ortiz, CEO of California-based Macrolife Naturals, agreed. “Consumer consciousness is one of the biggest changes: Ten years ago consumers did not know what a probiotic was, much less what it did. Today’s consumers recognize the probiotics are ‘good’ for them.”

Vice President of Marketing Bonnie Cooper, with ReNew Life Formulas, Inc. in Florida, pointed out that in retail, probiotics continue to grow double digits: AC Nielsen numbers (52 weeks ending March 16, 2013) show them up 23 percent in FDMx (food/drug/mass excluding Walmart), while SPINS numbers from that same period show an 18 percent increase in the Natural channel. Two years ago, FDMx was growing 34 percent and the Natural Channel was up 12 percent.

“Companies are looking for a way to differentiate their products with higher culture counts and special delivery methods—other than yogurt. And we are seeing probiotics cross over into the functional foods and pet food arena,” said Cooper. “We expect the category to continue double-digit growth on a compound basis over the next several years.”

New & Improved Products
While some manufacturers are offering what’s “new” in probiotic supplements and ingredients, others are continuing to fortify their flagship products.

ReNew Life has developed and launched two new probiotics in the last six months: Ultimate Flora Ultra Potent 100 Billion and Ultimate Flora Women’s Complete 90 Billion. According to Cooper, in a single-capsule dose, proprietary combinations of the company’s own Bifidobacteria and Lactobacillus GPS probiotic strains, are delivered via a delayed-release capsule to protect the probiotics from harsh stomach acids, and potency is guaranteed until end of shelf life, she said.

Strains are selected based on successful human clinical studies for specific health benefits. Macrolife Naturals’ Macro Greens “greens” superfood contains 18 billion probiotics. “These were added to the formula because probiotics improve overall digestion and...
are generally beneficial for treating various gastrointestinal disorders,” said Ortiz. “We use a science-based, five-strain probiotic blend in Macro Greens that helps boost the immune system and reduce symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Each serving of Macro Greens contains 18 billion unit, non-dairy probiotic cultures, which is equivalent to three capsules,” she explained. The blend contains Lactobacillus acidophilus, Lactobacillus rhamnosus, Lactobacillus bulgaricus, Bifidobacterium breve and Bifidobacterium longum.

Though not new, over the past several years Ganeden has invested in safety and efficacy data relating to its ingredient, GanedenBC30, which was initially identified and patented in the late 1990s and has been the primary strain used in Ganeden’s successful Digestive Advantage products, that are now owned and marketed by Reckitt Benckiser, said Bush. “As a branded ingredient company, Ganeden is dedicated to providing consumers with products that are easy to incorporate into their lifestyles without adding new habits. The strain was specifically selected for its safety, efficacy and stability profiles.”

Natasha Trenev, president and founder of California-based Natren, said the supplement company has not made a new probiotic product because its products are still advanced in terms of strain selection and delivery methods. “We produce probiotics exclusively, therefore we don’t consider line extensions, we only consider real probiotic products with unusual and real benefits,” she said. Healthy Trinity, Natren’s three-in-one probiotic oil-matrix system, is still 10 years beyond anything in the marketplace right now, she said.

More Than Digestion
Hailed as the “good bacteria,” probiotics are being discussed in terms of their benefits for high cholesterol, heart health, brain/gut axis and children’s allergies, among other health concerns. “Probiotics are living microorganisms that exert health benefits beyond basic nutrition when ingested in sufficient numbers,” said MacroLife’s Ortiz. “Science is investigating the following benefits: acid tolerance, bile tolerance, cell surface hydrophobicity, protoplast regeneration, antimicrobial activity, cholesterol removal and bile salt deconjugation, gut colonization and lactose removal.”

“It’s widely understood that probiotics offer a diverse array of health benefits,” said Amy Grossu-Piacentino, Natren trainer and educator. “For example, there are many probiotic company campaigns that currently state the immune system can be balanced by maintaining optimal levels of beneficial bacteria in the gut.”

“That’s only part of it,” added Trenev. “There are probiotics being tested for brain health, which includes emotional and mental, heart health, weight loss and for their effect on healthy, beautiful skin. There will probably be studies for probiotic effects on cholesterol in the near future.”

New York-based supplement company ProDermix said it is seeing new dimensions for its probiotic supplements since being recognized by the medical community.

“Dermatologists are recommending the product for atopic dermatitis and child eczema,” said President and CEO Usher Brecher. He also noted that dandruff, a Candida-related issue, can be eliminated with regular use of ProDermix, and that podiatrists are seeing good results with the product for athlete’s foot fungus. “Our ProDermix SUPREME (5 billion CFUs) has been remarkable in treating women’s yeast infections (Candida) and pregnant women have been amazed that their yeast problems during pregnancy were eliminated thanks to the product,” he added.

While studies look promising, Cooper noted that ReNew Life considers itself a digestive care company. “We believe better health and immunity begins with a properly functioning digestive system, which begins in the mouth and ends in the colon,” she explained. “The body’s systems are affected by a person’s digestive health, so we are very focused on this aspect of probiotics and keeping the entire digestive tract in balance every day. However, we are constantly monitoring the many studies that exist or are being done on various health benefits outside of gut health, like cholesterol, skin issues like acne, stress and more, but we remain focused on the importance of digestive health to overall health.”

Ganeden’s Bush agreed that gut health is the key to a multitude of health areas. “Good digestive health is imperative for living a quality, healthful life, and science is showing that probiotics are benefiting a variety of functions ranging from basic digestion and metabolism to immune health and inflammatory responses,” he added. “If we look at one example—the ability to metabolize simple sugars—we see a digestive issue that, when functioning optimally, goes unnoticed. But if one becomes incapable of metabolizing simple sugars, we see symptoms such as gas, bloating, constipation and diarrhea. It’s a simple process that relies on the appropriate balance of gut bacteria—a small shift in that balance can wreak havoc and produce debilitating symptoms.”

Retailer Sherri Kohler, a customer service and sales associate with Co-op opportunities Natural Foods in Santa Monica, CA, said there are customers who are looking at probiotics beyond digestive issues, but that this is a small group that is usually working with a naturopath or acupuncturist. “They may have allergies or skin issues and they are privy to thinking above and beyond gut health.” In general, however, most customers are usually interested in purchasing probiotic supplements to address gut health or after a course of antibiotics, she noted.

Nancy Sheets, owner of Nature’s Goodness retail store in Middletown, RI, said she also finds that customers seek out probiotic supplements to help with...
indigestion or after a run of antibiotics. “We recommend probiotics, and depending on their age we’ll [also] recommend digestive enzymes (usually for women in their 40s),” she said, noting that the store’s staff is well versed in the many benefits associated with probiotic use. “We recommend probiotics first because they help with so many different things.”

Although those additional benefits are becoming more known, Bush stressed that, given today’s regulatory environment, it is more important than ever for manufacturers to consult with qualified regulatory council with expertise in the probiotic space.

“Probiotic claims are based on scientific support for the particular strain being marketed,” he said. “It is commonly known that effectiveness varies wildly from strain to strain and that marketers should utilize credible science relating to the specific strain in the product it will be marketing.”

Treading Cautiously With New Trends

True, people are making the connection between digestive health and immunity to overall health. Daily usage of supplements are up, Greek yogurt and other yogurt products have seen incredible growth, health food shoppers are looking for higher CFUs and probiotics are making their way into gum, beverages as well as functional foods.

At Ganeden, the company’s focus for the next area of growth for probiotics is functional foods and beverages, and products aimed at targeted markets such as children, athletes, active moms and moms-to-be, active seniors and others, Bush said. “Increasingly, consumers are searching for functional foods and beverages that do more for them than satisfy their hunger or thirst.”

But Natren’s Grosso-Piacentino explained that the latest innovation might not always be the best option. “The new trends and dynamics that currently sell probiotics are cell count, multi-strain and consumer age group. It should be noted that though cell count and multi-strains are ‘trendy,’ they are not necessarily helpful and may be very misleading to the consumer.”

ReNew Life’s Cooper concurred, noting that rather than pursue trends, her company devotes a large amount of time to its manufacturing and encapsulating technology to make sure the good bacteria survives and is potent until end of shelf life. “Moisture, heat and light can kill many types of probiotic bacteria, so some of these new trends and delivery methods may be unreliable,” she pointed out.

At retail, consumers’ probiotic understanding still varies—some aren’t necessarily up on the latest or even fully understanding the basics. At Co-opportunities, Kohler said many customers ask for acidophilus not realizing that another strain may work better. “It’s a common name that most people know,” she explained. “Travelers want...