Health benefits of oats confirmed

By TIM LUNDEEN

ACCORDING to a new wide-reaching collection of reviews published in an October 2014 supplement of the British Journal of Nutrition, oats may play an important role in improving satiety, diet quality and digestive, cardiovascular and general metabolic health. In the supplement, titled “Oats, More Than Just a Whole Grain,” scientists from around the world explored aspects of oats — from agriculture and sustainability aspects of oats to health promotion from oats in health promotion in human health and agriculture that will further support — in relation to human health, agriculture and food processing. Some of the noteworthy takeaways from the supplement include:

- Epidemiological evidence suggests that regular consumption of whole-grain foods is correlated with a lower body mass index.
- Several studies outlined in the review suggested that eating oats helps reduce hunger and increase feelings of fullness.
- Similarly, recent evidence from a study published in the May 28 issue of Nutrition Journal found that subjects who ate a 217.5-calorie breakfast of oatmeal with nonfat milk for their first meal reported less hunger, increased fullness and a reduced desire to eat compared to subjects given an equal-calorie serving of ready-to-eat, oat-based cereal with nonfat milk.
- According to the aforementioned study and the supplement, satiety appears to be enhanced by the high-viscosity of the oatmeal’s beta-glucan compared to a ready-to-eat, oat-based cereal. Subsequently, researchers are looking into oat varieties with higher levels of beta-glucan to potentially amplify the fullness effects of oats.
- Whole grains are often recommended for their beneficial effects on the gastrointestinal tract. The role beneficial bacteria in the digestive tract play in human health is an area of great interest, with unique probiotic-like activities and unique polyphenols (avenanthramides) in oatmeal may benefit gut health and that resistant starch present in oats may specifically boost the beneficial bacteria Bifidobacterium in the lower gastrointestinal tract.
- A review of 29 studies concluded that oats and oat bran might provide benefits in some cases of bowel disease (one of two studies on ulcerative colitis and constipation) (14 studies). The review authors noted that oat products not crossed with other cereal grains that contain gluten (such as wheat) may be consumed by patients with celiac disease (11 studies).

Cardiovascular health

The authors noted that the evidence supporting the impact of beta-glucan fiber in oats on low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) and cardiovascular disease is so convincing that authorities in the U.S., Europe, Canada and Japan have issued formal health claims about the role of oats in heart health. For example, the European Food Safety Authority supports the claim that oat beta-glucan has been shown to lower/reduce blood cholesterol.

Furthermore, a review of the most recent studies on oats and oat bran and cardiovascular disease risk factors concluded that oats and oat bran lower total cholesterol and LDL-C by 2-4% and 4-23%, respectively; the effects are particularly pronounced among people with high cholesterol levels.

The study’s lead author, Dr. Frank Thies of the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, wrote that eating a 60 g serving of oatmeal might lower cholesterol significantly. To put it in perspective, an LDL-C reduction of 10% is estimated to reduce coronary heart disease risk by 6-18%. What’s more, all forms of oats — oat bran, oatmeal or other oat-containing foods — appear to be beneficial, the review concluded.

The 10 papers in the supplement include review articles of previously published, peer-reviewed studies covering all aspects of oat nutrition and food science, crop science, food processing, chronic disease prevention, food policy and public health implications.

The supplement was supported by unrestricted educational grants from Quaker Oats Co. The papers were written after a 2012 international conference — sponsored by Quaker Oats and organized by C3 Collaborating for Health — that was held to discuss the potential health implications of oats as part of a healthy diet.

Delpolarizing book

Conventional versus organic food production? Local production or global food sourcing? For one reason or another, those involved in growing and raising food are often at odds with one another.

A new book, Depolarizing Food & Agriculture: An Economic Approach, takes a look at the origins, validity, consequences and potential resolution of the different and often opposing stances taken by groups involved in the food business.

“Many issues in food and agriculture have become disputes — some of them serious conflicts, with no end in sight,” said Andrew Barkley, Kansas State University professor of agricultural economics and one of the book’s authors. “The economic approach offers a greater understanding of why these disagreements came about and how they can be resolved. We wrote this book to share the economic approach, which provides greater appreciation for both sides of these important issues.”

The divide between industry groups often stems from political or legal actions that confuse consumers, many of whom are considering the effects of their food choices on nutrition, health, the environment, animal welfare and hunger, Barkley said.

Barkley, who is also a university distinguished teaching scholar at Kansas State, co-wrote the book with his father, Paul W. Barkley, professor emeritus of agricultural economics and adjunct professor at Oregon State University. Their research emphasizes that the one constant in food and agriculture markets is change. Changes in technology, production practices, consumer desires and policies occur constantly, and change is often disruptive. Since change has both winners and losers, it can be polarizing, especially in a rapidly evolving sector like food and agriculture, they explained.

Based on a U.N. projection that the world’s population will grow from the current 7.2 billion people to 9.6 billion by 2050, it is more important than ever for agricultural producers to figure out the best ways to meet the demand for food, according to Barkley. In some cases, that might mean working together or at least understanding a different perspective.