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Sweden approves its first health claim

Swedish regulators have given the green light for the first product in Sweden to sport a product-specific health claim. Primaliv yoghurt, which carries the claim that it can "balance your blood sugar level and lower your cholesterol", is the first product to have its scientific documentation reviewed and approved under the Swedish food industry's self-regulatory Code of Practice on health claims, which came into operation last year. Approval of the claim made the news on prime-time Swedish evening TV.

Primaliv is the first food product in Sweden to be delineated as a functional food. Primaliv's is also thought to be the first product-specific health claim to be have been approved by a regulator anywhere in Europe.

"It's wonderful news that Primaliv has been approved as Sweden's first functional food," said Lotta Törner, director of information at Skånemejerier, the dairy group which developed Primaliv. "The approval means we can now say in our marketing that if you eat Primaliv with your meal you will have even progress in your blood sugar level."

Primaliv i balans – to give the brand its full and correct name – is a 200ml cup of low-fat yogurt with a small pot of muesli on top, with a spoon – a unique and innovative snack format on the Swedish market. The uniqueness of the format means that Primaliv's price cannot easily be compared to "regular" products, although it does sell at something of a premium. Primaliv comes in vanilla, berry and natural flavors.

Primaliv i balans- the name means "good life in balance" in Swedish – has been marketed for the last year only in the Skåne region of Sweden, in the south of the country, which is Skåne Dairy's heartland. In the wake of the claim approval Primaliv will now go national – and Skåne has its eyes on international markets.

The active ingredient is oat beta glucans, which provides an even blood sugar level and a lower insulin response after a meal. The beta glucans also have a cholesterol-lowering effect. And according to Skåne Dairy it's the muesli in the lid that contains the oat beta glucans.

The package carries a somewhat scientific graphic of a flattened blood-sugar curve compared to a blood sugar curve with more of a spike to help convey the idea of what Primaliv does.

Increased insulin and blood sugar levels are factors in the onset of adult diabetes. As elsewhere in the industrial world, Type 2 diabetes is an increasing problem in Sweden. Over 350,000 Swedes (out of a total population of 8.1 million people) suffer from the disease.

Primaliv has been clinically tested on healthy test subjects at Lund University – one of the world's three leading centres for research into blood sugar response and the centre of the thriving southern Swedish functional foods cluster. The group that ate Primaliv as part of their meal had a 36% lower blood sugar increase than the reference group and the insulin value decreased by 44%.

The international panel of experts appointed under the health claims Code of Practice has certified that the scientific documentation for Primaliv supports that the product regulates blood sugar levels after a meal.

Skåne Dairy, which has annual sales of around $250 million, is the number two player in the Swedish dairy market, which is dominated by Arla Foods, the Swedish-Danish combine which is also Europe's largest dairy company. Although Arla leads in commodity dairy products, in health Arla has been out-innovated and out-marketed at every step by its smaller rival, with the result that Skåne Dairy, alongside Finland's Valio Dairy, is seen as the Scandinavian region's leader in health.

Skåne's Pro Viva probiotic fruit juice, for example – when it was launched, the first non-dairy probiotic product in the world – has proven a massive hit, selling 12 million litres annually in a country with just 8.1 million people. Skåne now also has national listings for Pro Viva in all the UK's leading retail chains. Pro Viva has also been extended into a successful sports beverage format.

For a full explanation of the Swedish self-regulatory health claim system, see the Regulation Case Study on page 29.

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