

Obesity And Its Effect On Consumer Health

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Euromonitor International analyses current developments and issues on obesity, including their impact in the present and future of consumer health.

Implications of obesity in consumer health

The dismal results in the pipeline of obesity drugs would seem to benefit future sales of orlistat represented by OTC drug, alli (GlaxoSmithKline Plc). For now, it is the only OTC active ingredient approved as a weight loss drug in the world, but inconvenient side effects in the digestive system remain a deterrent for purchase.

In spite of the early optimism shown for alli sales in Europe in 2009, GlaxoSmithKline reported lower sales for the drug in the third quarter of 2010.

Thousands of brands and products are marketed as slimming products in the form of weight loss supplements, meal replacement slimming products, slimming teas, and other similar products. Euromonitor International estimated sales of OTC obesity drugs at US\$380 million, while slimming products reached over US\$9 billion in 2009.

In spite of the increasing rates of obesity, retail value sales of slimming products declined 3% due to stricter regulation of such products. Health ministries and law enforcement organizations became more active in stopping illegal sales by recalling or seizing misleading products.

Many products have also been found tainted with prescription drug sibutramine or contaminated with toxic ingredients.

Direct sellers are the most important channel of sales. They held a 24% global value share led by companies Amway Corp and Herbalife Ltd, both of which have extensive operations in Asia Pacific, North and Latin America.

Herbalife's strength relies in the meal replacement slimming products, while Amway concentrates in weight loss supplements.

Other implications of obesity need attention

The metabolism of drugs is becoming a new area of concern. Dosages are usually calculated according to weight; however, dosing information on OTC labels is usually addressed by age.

For example, a ten-year old obese child will require a higher dose of an OTC analgesic when compared to a child of the same age with normal weight.

Risks of unintentional low dosage or overdose are easy to miss. The challenge for the industry, health practitioners and consumers is to know what the correct dose should be based on a person's weight, and have it published on the label or packaging.

A special concern relates to children, whose metabolism can act differently from that of adults.

Sugar, high fructose corn syrup, alcohol and sorbitol have a negative effect on people with diabetes and obese people tend to become diabetic. Many OTC drugs contain these ingredients. However, in recent months a wider array of products has been introduced to meet the specific needs of the diabetic population.

Many people want to lose weight in a fast and effective manner. They want a quick solution using the law of the minimum effort, and are willing to explore new diets and products promising, what are ultimately, misleading results.

In the search for the magic pill, people may fall prey to the advertising and promotion of questionable slimming products. The stance of regulatory agencies across the world is consistent in terms of protecting consumers from risky products.

However, the regulatory approval process differs greatly. For example, the Korean Food Safety Administration approved the largest number of slimming products, mostly fat burners in 2009.

In contrast, the Federal Drug Administration in the United States increased its oversight on the sales of slimming products by sending more warning letters to manufacturers not complying with the required guidelines established for such products.

Will the “slim” opportunity to introduce a new obesity drug deter companies from innovating?

Apart from OTC obesity drugs and slimming products, current obesity trends will ironically benefit the sales in other categories of consumer health. Sales of analgesics could increase furthermore if used to treat painful joints due to extra weight.

An antifungal can help treat minor diabetic wounds, and OTC statins help reduce cholesterol.

Calming and sleeping products may also see a benefit as obese people tend to suffer from sleep apnoea. Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), a 50% risk of developing in obese people according to the American College of Gastroenterology, may generate higher sales of proton pump inhibitors (PPIs).

Yet, most sales developments in weight management will be seen as foodstuffs or dietary supplements. Popular ingredients used in these products include chitosan, chromium, green tea, oolong tea, fibre, bitter orange, and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) among others.

Companies are developing ingredients for the foods, beverages and dietary supplements industries. Novel ingredient technology includes bean extract (Phase 2 by Pharmachem Laboratories Inc), potato extract (Satisfy by Slendesta “Kemin Industries Inc), and palm oil lipids (Fabulesse by DSM NV). All of these seek to increase satiety in people.

Archer Daniels Midland Co (ADM) is taking it a step further with the promotion of a “cola meal replacement slimming supplement containing sterols (CardioAid), dietary soluble fibre (Fibersol-2), soy isoflavones (NovaSoy) and soy protein (NutriSoy).

Other emerging technologies include cellulose-based hydrogels that expand in the stomach and promote satiety. Gelesis is the leading company in the development of Attiva, a super absorbent hydrogel made from food ingredients, and currently in final human clinical stages.

Obesimed (PK Benelux), available for sale in Europe, uses a similar hydrogel technology made with fibre particles to produce satiety. In the United States Sensa Products LLC introduced SENSE® Tastants, a powder to be sprinkled on foods before eating them.

The product is formulated with maltodextrin, tricalcium phosphate, silica, natural and artificial flavours, and acts by sending signals of fullness to the brain through the olfactory sense.

In the short-term, slimming products will gain more benefits on the consumer health side than on the prescription (Rx) side. The lesser regulatory restrictions on foodstuffs and dietary supplements in most countries of the world can support further growth.

Yet, the remaining challenge for the industry is how to differentiate safe and efficacious products from those that put human health at risk for the sake of financial gain.

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