

# Fiber finds its moment in the Ozempic age

New weight loss drugs open window for brands to tout other benefits

By Rick Polito

Marc Washington was beating the drum for fiber long before the catchy “Oh-oh-oh Ozempic” jingle started annoying TV watchers, and though it may sound ironic coming from a supplement industry executive, Washington says it was drugs like Ozempic targeting the GLP-1 hormone for weight loss that brought fiber the attention the **Supergut** founder thinks it deserves.

From an “Oatzempic” concoction of cold oats and lime juice trending on TikTok, to talk of psyllium husk as “the poor man’s Ozempic,” to an April *Wall Street Journal* headline declaring a “Race to Make a Sexy Fiber Supplement Is On,” fiber is getting noticed in ways it never has before.

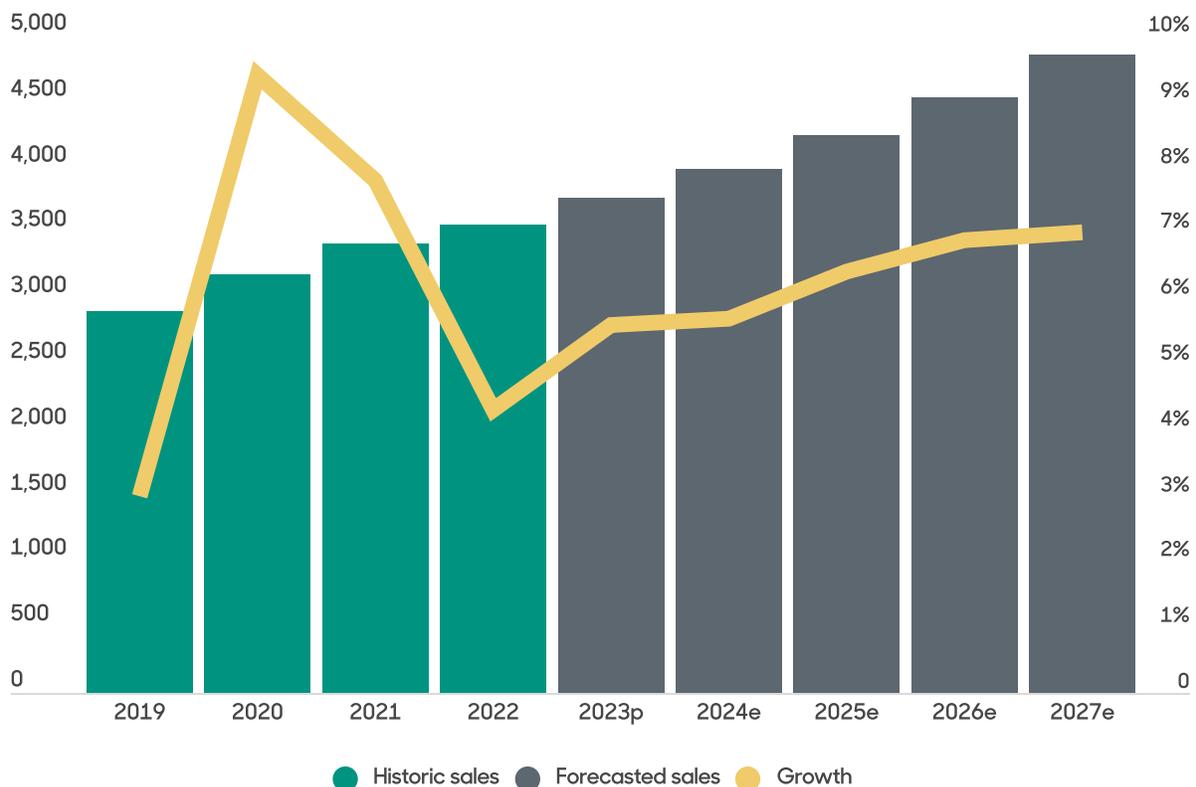
It couldn’t happen at a better time for Washington, unless that time was five years ago when he founded Supergut, then

## NBJ Takeaways

- » Ozempic and other drugs targeting GLP-1 for weight loss boosted interest in fiber
- » Gut health was already accelerating sales for prebiotics before the weight loss drugs appeared
- » Maintaining momentum for prebiotics and fiber will take education that goes beyond the TikTok videos about “oatzempic”

branded Muniq, as an homage to a sister he lost to complications of diabetes. The rebranding as Supergut two years ago was well timed to the surge in interest fiber

Gastrointestinal health supplement sales and growth, 2019-2027e



Source: Nutrition Business Journal (\$mil, consumer sales)

Note: Numbers are final through 2022, preliminary for 2023 based on early market predictions and estimated for 2024 and beyond.

received in the dawn of what *The New Yorker* called “the Ozempic age.” In 2019, the conversation Washington tried to have with consumers about fiber, focusing on gut health and blood sugar, turned out to be ahead of its time, he says. “Fortunately, the Ozempic era came up and gave us an opportunity to now tell the story.”

It’s a good story, too. As few as 3% of Americans eat enough fiber, and the lack of fiber is a hallmark of processed food, which is increasingly being labeled a nutritional plague taxing the healthcare system. From blood sugar to cholesterol to—yes—obesity, insufficient fiber intake might be the health crisis nobody is talking about.

Except, now they are.

Hannah Ackerman runs marketing and communications for **Comet**, a Chicago-based startup behind Arrabina, a branded prebiotic the company touts as “nature’s best dietary fiber, perfected.” For Ackerman, the sign that fiber was having a moment came at the San Francisco Future

## The “oatzempic” moment

### Q&A with Kara Landau, Gut Feeling Consultancy

In the minds of consumers, fiber was trapped in the digestive tract for decades, but hype around the transformational weight loss drugs like Wegovy and Mounjaro, followed by TikTok trends that tout psyllium as “the poor man’s Ozempic,” has pulled fiber into the weight loss sphere. We talked to fiber aficionado and registered dietitian Kara Landau about whether brands could seize the moment to educate consumers on other benefits of fiber.

**NBJ:** What’s your opinion of the general awareness of fiber?

**Landau:** I think that there is a general awareness that fiber as a nutrient is healthy; however, the understanding of the plethora of benefits that fiber provides through various mechanisms of action, and the fact that there are different types of fibers that provide very different benefits, is not yet understood at a mass level. I think the fact that brands are promoting fiber in relation to gut health, as opposed to previously solely digestive health, has helped make fiber more attractive and fit with hotter topics that a younger demographic is both curious about and more comfortable to talk about publicly, both of which further enhance the speed at which awareness can rise.

**NBJ:** What do you think of “Oatzempic” and last summer’s chatter about psyllium as “poor man’s Ozempic?”

**Landau:** If people’s recognition of the satiety benefits that fiber provides (and the impact this has on weight loss) as their motivation to bring more of this nutrient into their diet, I, for one, am supportive of that. Do I think consuming your oats ground down and with water is going to automatically make you lose weight on its own? No. Do I think consuming oats with water, rather than mixed with other sources of protein, healthy fats and additional fiber would be more beneficial for weight loss? No. Do I believe consuming psyllium husk specifically is going to make you lose weight on its own? No. However, do I think incorporating uncooked oats and psyllium, sources of prebiotic resistant starch and soluble fibers, respectively, into an overall healthier way of eating will assist with feelings of fullness, feed the good gut bacteria that can stimulate hormones in a positive direction to help manage blood sugar levels, reduce cravings or feelings of hunger, and ultimately assist with weight loss or weight management goals? Yes.

**NBJ:** Do you think Ozempic has opened a window to talk about other fiber benefits?

**Landau:** I think that gone are the days of fiber solely being seen as a digestive health aid in the supplement aisle, and the fact that fiber is so closely intertwined with hotter topics

such as gut health, and now weight loss drugs, is a positive shift that opens up an opportunity to position fiber’s role in offering benefits that go beyond bowel habits.

**NBJ:** Do you think this new wave of interest in fiber will last?

**Landau:** I think fiber is finally coming into the spotlight, after protein held the title for so many years. I do believe that based on there being so much solid science to support the benefits of a fiber-rich diet, and the fact that the benefits span across different lifespan stages and offer such diverse health benefits, only further instills its ability to remain a hot topic that is of interest to people to both learn more about and to find ways to incorporate into their daily lives, not only today but continuously into their future, too.

**NBJ:** What research would you like to see around fiber and weight loss? Is it possible there is a particular kind of fiber that is going to trigger the best GLP-1 response?

**Landau:** There is an abundance of science that has been performed over the years to show the satiety benefits that come from soluble fibers, and more recently (and in smaller amounts) on resistant starch, which is known to help cells be more responsive to insulin and aiding in feelings of fullness. I definitely believe that through a combination of prebiotic fibers and resistant starches there is a way of tapping into various pathways that could both stimulate the body’s natural release of satiety hormones, such as GLP-1 and PYY, and slow the digestion of food, which can keep hunger at bay. Together these will nourish the gut bacteria and the mucosal lining in the gut that plays a role in regulating and stimulating these hormones. Digging deeper into the science on which probiotic strains play the greatest role in these pathways, and seeking to understand which prebiotics they most profoundly feed off, and then running a trial to see the weight loss implications from consuming a specific dosage of these nutrients, could be one way in which science could be used to help transform the nutritional offerings available and reduce the usage of prescription medications with potential negative longer-term side effects.

Food Tech conference in March. A session focusing on protein pivoted to fiber. “I’ve never heard that happen with a group of industry experts before,” she says.

As a registered dietician, Ackerman sees an opportunity that goes beyond Arrabina, a soluble fiber upcycled from wheat straw that’s optimized for inclusion in both supplements and food. She talks about the ominous 3% statistic and remarks that the figure hasn’t changed in years. “I am hoping that this renewed focus helps move the needle,” she says.

### Weighting for the right moment

It’s not surprising that the needle has remained fixed for so long. As Washington puts it, the conversation around fiber has long focused primarily on digestive issues. “It’s all about pooping,” he says. Interest in gut health was already rising, but fiber needed the kick-start that Ozempic and the like gave it.

Washington saw growth when he rebranded from Muniq to Supergut, but the Ozempic age gave him the ability to talk about GLP-1, the hormone that Ozempic, Wegovy and other drugs target to boost satiety. Fiber and prebiotics also stimulate GLP-1. It’s not on the label for his fiber packets and shakes but “Boost GLP-1” features prominently in online marketing. Sales rose by 400% last year, and Washington is racing to boost production capacity.

Washington’s marketing team may not be overstepping, either. Fiber does not boost GLP-1 at a pharma scale, but the boost is measurable and documented. The

weight loss potential doesn’t stop there, Ackerman says. When Arrabina and other soluble fibers ferment in the gut, the process unleashes additional benefits. “It releases not only GLP-1 but other crucial appetite-decreasing hormones such as peptide YY, and these smaller molecules can independently suppress appetite and help with improved glucose regulation.”

All of that for far less than the \$1,000 a month people are paying for the Ozempic-class drugs without insurance.

Like Washington, Luc Maes has also been talking about fiber for a long time. He launched his **Kaibae** baobab fruit powder 12 years ago. As a naturopath, he has always recommended fiber as a first step for patients looking to lose weight, and even now, with GLP-1 rising as the go-to strategy for weight loss, Maes insists it’s just one arrow in the quiver for his fiber-rich product. “Here we have a drug that boosts this one receptor—*one*,” he says of the GLP-1 agonist drugs, “but we’re learning that fiber and polyphenols stimulate a multitude of receptors throughout the gut.” He points to a bacterium gaining notice for stimulating

*“I think we are three years away from an acceleration, surpassing in relative importance among key groups what the importance of probiotics has been.”*

– Len Monheit, Global Prebiotics Association

weight loss. “You’re restoring the environment for *akkermansia* to grow.”

If the new class of weight loss drugs spurs interest in fiber, Maes is willing to take advantage of that. He can talk about it as an alternative to the drugs and also as a way to help people when they come off them, to control their weight and also to restore lost muscle, a troubling side effect of the GLP-1 agonist drugs. Fiber promotes short-chain fatty acids that boost protein uptake, he explains. “The synergy between protein and fiber is important,” Maes says.

The benefits don’t end there, of course, but if weight loss is an entry point for consumers, that’s OK with Maes. “I think fiber is definitely getting its time,” he says.

### A broader groundswell

Len Monheit agrees that fiber is getting “its time,” but he is not ready to give too much credit to “the Ozempic age.” The industry veteran who heads the Global Prebiotics Association says growing interest in gut health across a variety of health concerns was feeding rising interest in fiber and prebiotics long before the Ozempic jingle was first heard. “It is not *the* factor,” he says of the GLP-1 drugs, “but it is certainly *a* factor.”

Though consumer perception may lump fiber and prebiotics together, Monheit is quick to note that “not all fibers are prebiotic.” He also admits that awareness of prebiotics is well behind probiotics with those same consumers. “The Activia moment has not occurred,” he says, referring to the yogurt brand that employed Jaime Lee Curtis to introduce the probiotic concept to the mainstream. Still, prebiotics are selling well. *NBJ* has tracked prebiotics growing substantially faster than probiotics.

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– Marc Washington, Supergut

That sales track record, Monheit explains, can be attributed to the versatility of prebiotics that has allowed awareness to grow across a spectrum of benefits. “It used to be digestion and poop, and now it’s about your cortisol, your other biomarkers, inflammation,” he says, listing conditions like blood sugar management and mood/mental health. “It’s diffusing,” he says.

That broad interest, Monheit claims, is leading to deeper sophistication among consumers who have started doing research on their own to match particular fibers and prebiotics to particular conditions. “They’re getting a little bit more discerning,” Monheit says. “They’re looking for specific prebiotics.”

They may also want to know where the prebiotics and fibers came from, how they are processed and what other benefits might be layered in. Like Maes, Monheit points to fibers that include polyphenols. He talks about dosages getting down to “the range of one or two grams,” a good fit for supplements, but he also talks about inclusion in foods. “I think we are three years away from an acceleration, surpassing in relative importance among key groups what the importance of prebiotics has been.”

### Discernment and differentiation

Cultivating the sophistication that Monheit talks about is no mean feat in the blurring overlap of fiber and prebiotics, but it’s also key to the success that Jim Flatt is looking for with the Bio Gut Fiber, the first branded ingredient from **Brightseed**, the AI ingredient discovery company Flatt founded with two other scientists. Flatt contends that the bioactives NCT and NFT in the fiber support a healthy gut barrier and have other benefits under study

now. He also says it’s designed for easy digestion and inclusion in foods.

What he doesn’t say is that consumers understand what the different fibers do, particularly specialized fibers like Brightseed’s. Getting them to understand may be simpler than it sounds, however. Jamie Lee Curtis made probiotics sound straightforward for Activia. Flatt believes a callout as simple as “bioactive fiber” could do the same thing, especially for the 27% of consumers that Brightseed’s consumer research labels “bioactivists,” people who actively follow nutrition research. Fiber is a relatively intuitive concept—it’s in the foods people know they should be eating—and the “fiber of the future” message he envisions for Bio Gut builds on that. Branded fibers, he says, simply “deliver additional benefits beyond what fiber alone can provide.”

**Manitoba Harvest** President Jared Simon is betting Flatt is right. Manitoba is the first company to include Bio Gut in a product, combining the ingredient refined from hemp hull fiber with psyllium husk. Simon is confident there is a kind of con-

sumer who will see “Organic Bioactive Fiber” on the label and want to know more. If they look closer, they will see “powered by Brightseed Bio Gut Fiber.” The consumer Manitoba courts here is the one who picks up the tub and starts reading the educational information on the back. “They’re taking an extra moment to go a little deeper on fiber,” he says. “I do think it’s something that needs a little bit of time and something that needs a little bit of thought to understand.”

Simon believes new fibers like Bio Gut, perhaps in new formats, are what it’s going to take to make fiber stretch its Ozempic moment. It can’t all be Benefiber and Metamucil. It might not take the “sexy fiber” the *Wall Street Journal* headline described, but it can’t be generic psyllium husk either. “It’s more product selection out there,” Simon says. “More choices.”

Flatt describes Bio Gut as “Not your grandfather’s fiber,” and says more research will unveil more fibers with specialized appeal. Among the targets will undoubtedly be satiety for weight loss, something that Brightseed’s ingredient can already claim, but the Ozempic effect only needs to be an introduction.

And in the long run, for most people, the right fiber might be the better option anyway. “[Appetite] suppression is going to be much more modest than you’re going to get from a drug, but it’s also going to be something that’s intrinsically much safer,” Flatt explains.

And a lot cheaper, he adds. 🌱

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