Vitafoods Insights

Sports nutrition beyond performance

How everyday athletes are reshaping the category

Introduction

As sports nutrition expands beyond elite athletes, the needs and preferences of everyday active consumers are shaping how products are formulated, positioned, and consumed. This report explores the evolving use of protein, creatine, and branched-chain amino acids, the repositioning of hydration outside of performance, and the growing role of gut health in sports nutrition.

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Everyday consumers reshape sports nutrition

Sports nutrition is no longer solely for elite athletes looking to compete at peak performance. Rather, the category is increasingly being shaped by everyday consumers who engage in regular physical activity as part of their lifestyle, rather than structured training or competition.

This demographic typically includes those who attend gyms or fitness classes, or participate in recreational sports several times a week, and who view physical activity as part of a broader approach to health and wellbeing.

Performance is still relevant to these consumers, yet their expectations extend beyond acute outcomes. This includes aspects such as strength gains or improvements to endurance, and covers everything from energy levels and recovery to digestive comfort and long-term health.

As a result of this expanding consumer base, boundaries between sports nutrition,

functional foods, and general wellness are becoming less defined.

Products traditionally positioned for use around training sessions are now being incorporated into daily routines, including as breakfast, on-the-go snacks, and hydration throughout the day.

For brands, this has implications for product development.

Active consumers tend to prioritise taste, texture, convenience, and price more heavily than elite athletes,[1] and are often less tolerant of gastrointestinal side effects or highly concentrated formulations.

This is influencing decisions around dosage, ingredient selection, and delivery formats, particularly as products move into food and beverage applications rather than supplements alone.

In addition, everyday consumers are often more sceptical of performance-led claims and less willing to compromise on sensory experience in exchange for functionality.[2] This raises expectations for substantiation and communication.

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Protein beyond powder

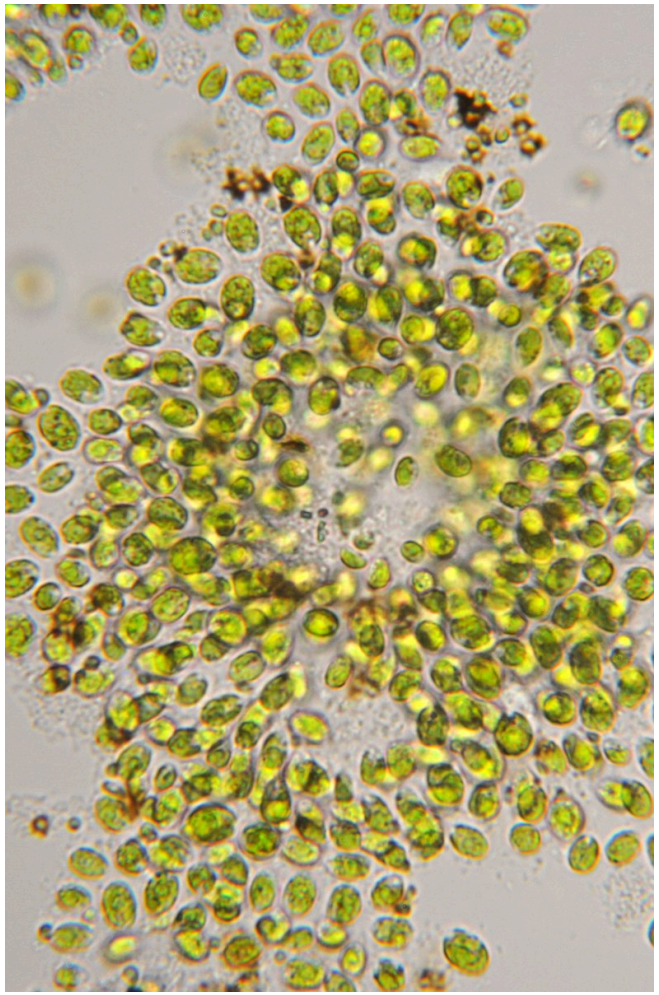
Format, texture, and everyday use

A cornerstone of sports nutrition, and something many in the past associated – and still do – with the category, is a scoop of whey protein powder added to water or milk and chugged down during or soon after a muscle-focused weight session in the gym.

While protein powders and shakes continue to play a role in muscle recovery and strength-focused training, everyday active consumers are increasingly accessing protein through a wider range of food and beverage formats.

The saturation of high-protein products in practically every food and beverage category demonstrates this.

According to Mintel's Global New Product Database (GNDP), the number of new product launches carrying a high-protein claim has increased sharply over the past decade. In 2013, just 2,905 of the new products launched globally that year carried a high-protein claim; in 2018, this jumped to 10,599, and in 2025, 14,147 products were brought to the market, covering everything from high-protein bread to confectionery and ice cream.



Read more Chlorella-based 'marine whey' offers cost-effective protein alternative

As protein becomes a key component in everyday eating occasions, formulation priorities are changing. For non-elite athletes, protein intake is less tightly linked to post-workout timing and more associated with convenience, satiety, and general health.

This is driving demand for products that deliver moderate protein doses in palatable, familiar formats that can be consumed throughout the day or on the go.

Clear protein formats gain ground

Animal-derived clear protein is typically made from whey isolate that has undergone additional processing to remove carbohydrates, fats, and most lactose. The end result is a transparent and light-bodied protein.

Compared to its milky whey protein powder counterpart, clear protein is lower in viscosity and higher in solubility, making it easily mixable into water.

Plant-based clear protein, meanwhile, most commonly uses a base of pea protein isolate, which then undergoes hydrolysis to increase its water solubility and reduce its particle size, allowing the beverage to appear translucent.

While relatively new to the market, it is widely positioned as being refreshing and hydrating, and often marketed in fruit-forward flavours. Dutch nutrition brand UpFront,[3] for example, sells clear whey across formats, offering a lemonade-flavoured protein powder and a water-based ready-to-drink beverage.

In 2026, alt-meat brand Beyond Meat launched a line of clear plant protein beverages. The beverages are currently available in three flavours, including peach mango, lemon lime, and orange tangerine.

The formulation includes hydrolysed pea protein, electrolytes, and soluble tapioca fibre.[4]

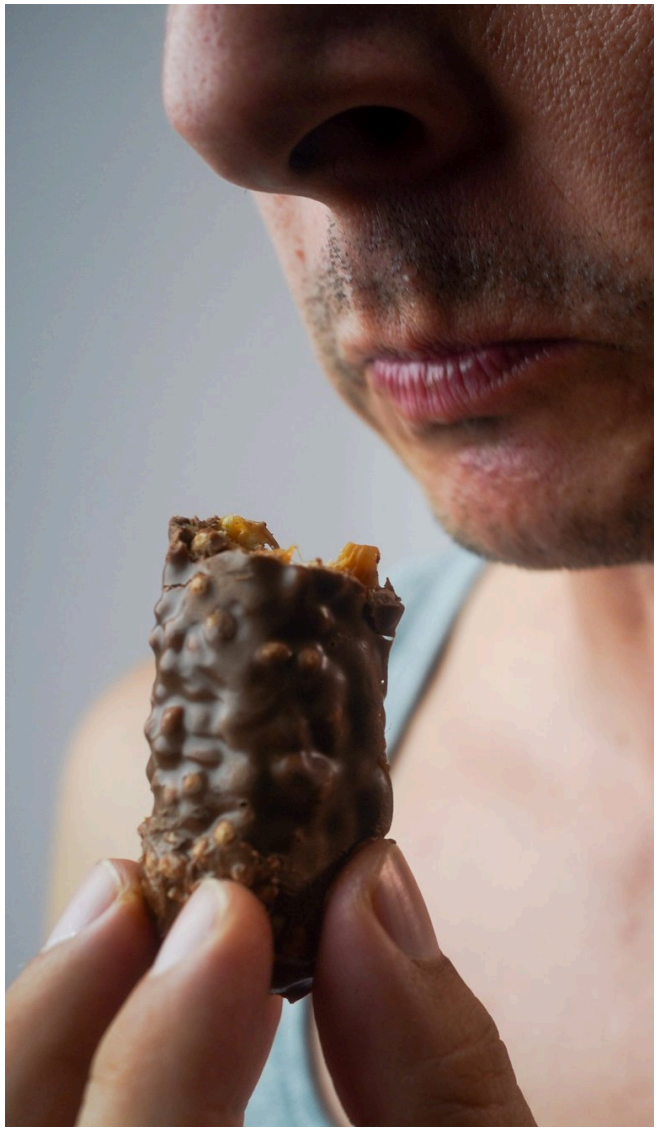
Protein bars: Mouthfeel and textural components

While elite athletes may be more forgiving about the texture and eating experience of high-protein products – as long as they deliver on high protein – everyday active consumers are generally less so, meaning that texture is becoming as important as taste and macronutrients.

Nick Morgan, founder and managing director of Nutrition Integrated, a data and insights provider for the active nutrition market, wrote in a blog post: "The truth is, texture is becoming a key battleground in the protein bar space.

"Although many would still argue that it comes second to taste, it's only just short of coming up trumps.

"Because if we think about bars through an



indulgence lens, texture sits front and centre alongside taste.

"A soft bite, a chewy pull, a crisp snap: sensory details that create uniqueness and interest."

As such, when the sensory experience does not hit the mark, consumers may be quick to abandon even their favourite brands.

In 2025, AI-powered customer feedback analysis platform Syncly analysed thousands of online reviews for four prominent protein bar brands – MET-Rx, CLIF Builders, David High Protein Bars, and IQBAR – to gauge from a consumer point of view which aspects of these bars were satisfying, and where there is room for improvement.[5]

Across all four brands, two topics dominated the negative feedback: flavour and scent, and texture. Negative textural comments outweighed positive ones by 119 to 44.

Of David High Protein Bars, one reviewer said: “Somehow their formula has also changed – it taste[s] more gummy gelatine-like, quite unnatural, and is super sticky (to the packaging).”

IQBAR’s texture, similarly, was described as “sawdust-like”, and CLIF Builders was described as “hard to chew”, and “as if it had been frozen and then thawed out”.

In its analysis, Syncly found that flavour was the most important driver of consumer dissatisfaction, responsible for 57.3% of all one-star reviews and 55% of all two-star reviews. In bars rated three stars, however, texture was an important factor, featuring in 17.7% of reviews.

“This tells a critical story for product developers: a bad flavour will kill your rating instantly. A bad texture might not lead to a one-star review on its own, but it will prevent you from getting a four- or five-star rating,” said Luke Bae, head of growth at Syncly.

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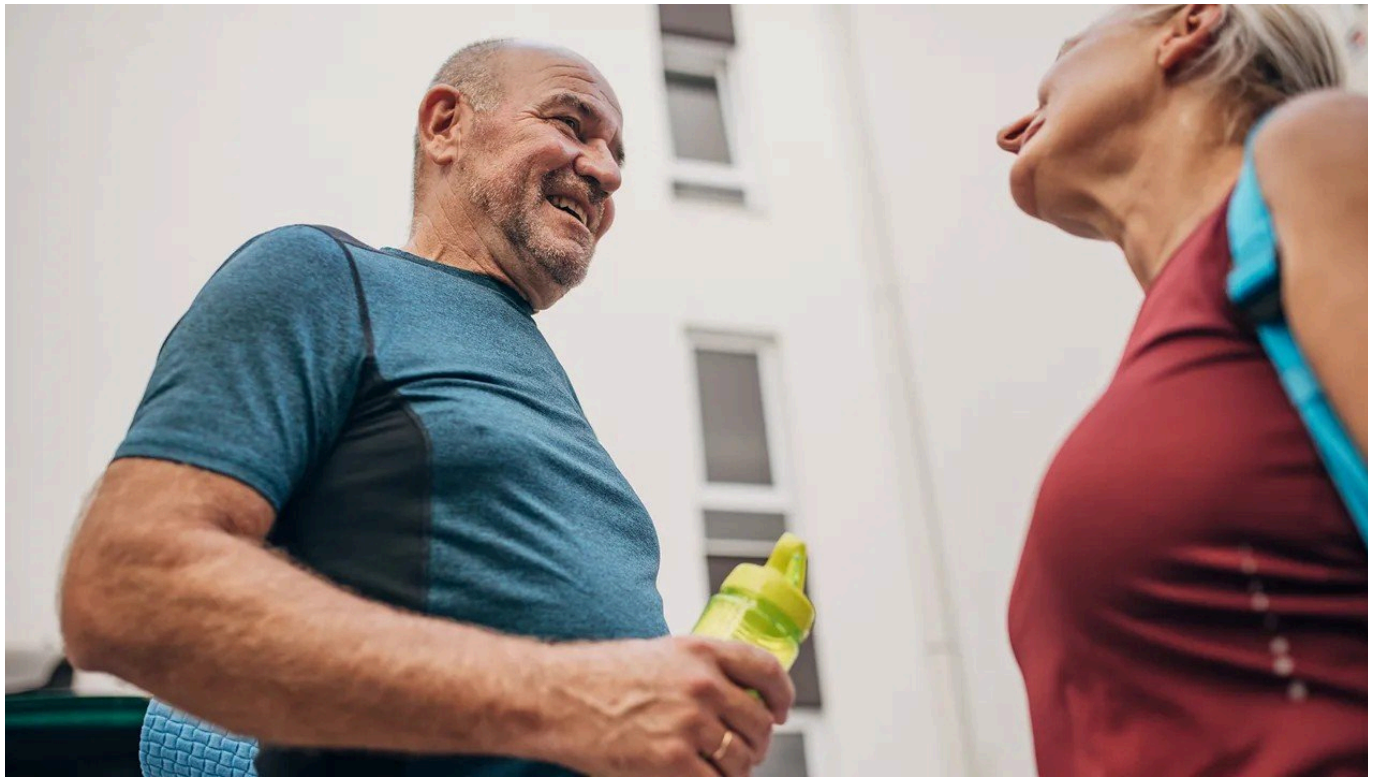
Functional stacking

The rising ingredients of sports nutrition

Now that protein has moved into the mainstream, brands are increasingly using it as a foundation to stack additional functional ingredients. This includes the incorporation of compounds or ingredients traditionally associated with sports supplementation, such as creatine and branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs), into food-based formats.



Read more Creatine, colostrum, and contested claims shaping sports and active nutrition

Creatine

Creatine is a naturally occurring compound produced by the pancreas, liver, and kidneys. The compound is also found in whole foods like fish and red meat.

Creatine is stored in muscle tissue, where it plays a key role in regenerating adenosine triphosphate (ATP).

Because of this, it has historically been associated with strength sports and bodybuilding, as it allows muscles to recycle energy faster.[6]

Introduced to the general public following the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, creatine started to gain popularity as a supplement in 1993, when creatine monohydrate became commercially available.[7]

Now, despite its primary association with athletes and bodybuilders, creatine has expanded its reach to a broader audience, according to Innova Market Insights.[8]

Creatine: Delivery formats

Recent product launches, accessed using Mintel's GNDP, demonstrate how creatine is being repositioned for everyday use in familiar food and beverage formats rather than as traditional supplements in powder, tablet, or capsule form.

The use of bar formats, for example, allows creatine to be incorporated into routine snacking occasions rather than being tied to pre- or post-workout supplementation.

In Australia, Musashi Protein + Energy launched a range of protein bars in December 2025 containing 1g of creatine monohydrate alongside 15g of protein per 58g bar.

Also in Australia, Famous Nutrition introduced salted caramel and cookies & cream nutrition bars, delivering 1.5g of creatine and 20g of protein per serving, reflecting a growing focus on the combination of performance-associated ingredients with indulgent flavour profiles.

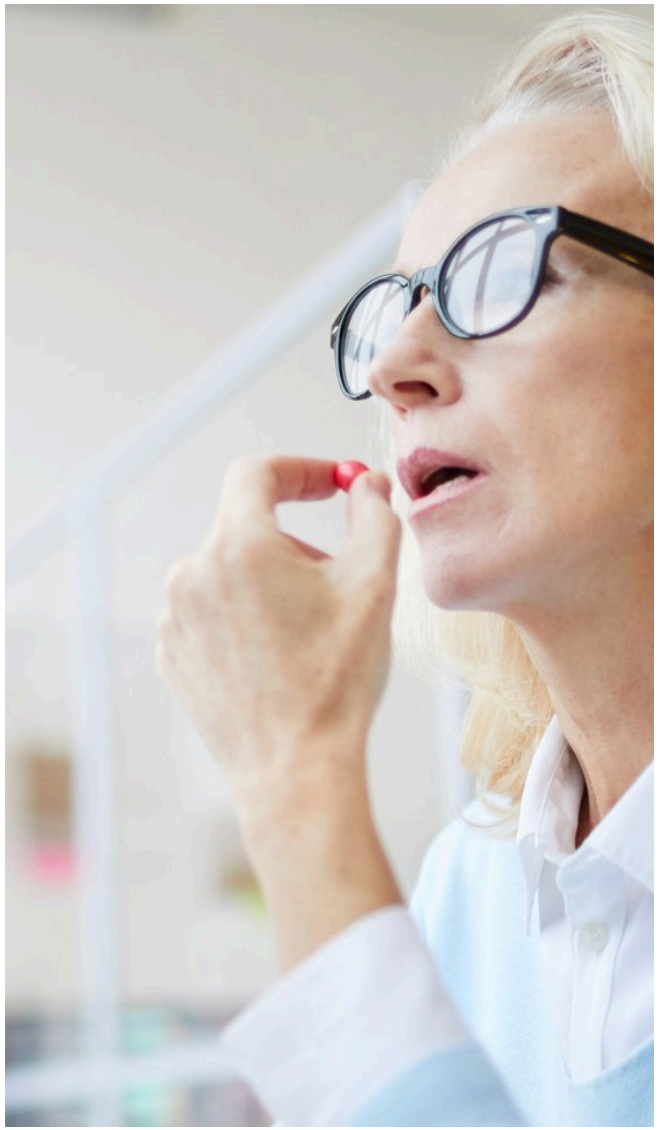
In Europe, dairy and dairy-free formats are also emerging.

In Portugal, Ehrmann launched a high-protein, chocolate-flavoured creatine pudding in December 2025, delivering 1.5g of creatine and 20g of protein per serving.

In February 2026, US plant-based protein beverage brand Koia announced the launch of a strawberry protein and creatine beverage, delivering 32g of protein and 1g of creatine per serving.

Beyond bars and ready-to-drink products (RTDs), the creatine gummy market has grown by 50% in the past 12 months, according to Nutrition Integrated,[9] as brands look to make the increasingly popular ingredient more accessible to a broader consumer base.

It is also experiencing rapid growth: Europe has seen a 50% increase in the number of creatine gummy products and a 48% increase in the number of brands offering them in the past 12 months.[10]



Some brands are exploring more unconventional formats. In Argentina, Olympic Pro launched a creatine-enriched peanut butter in September 2025, delivering 2.4g of creatine per 25g serving.

Meanwhile, in Japan, bt & Me introduced an instant coffee product incorporating creatine alongside ingredients such as allulose and ginseng extract.

BCAAs

Of the 20 amino acids, there are nine that the body cannot make by itself. These are called “essential amino acids” and must be acquired through diet.[11]

Three of these – leucine, isoleucine, and valine – are BCAAs, found in high-protein foods such as meat, dairy, and legumes.

While established in the sports nutrition space, the scientific evidence on BCAA supplements in sports is nuanced.

A 2022 systematic review published in *Nutrients*[12] evaluated oral BCAA use in athletic populations and reported mixed findings across outcomes – recovery, exercise performance, markers of muscle damage, and training adaption.

Some studies suggested modest reductions in perceived soreness and biochemical indicators of muscle stress, while effects on endurance and strength performance were inconsistent and often influenced by baseline protein intake or training status. The authors concluded: "The benefits of BCAAs should be interpreted with caution."

While the science may be inconclusive, BCAAs are often positioned as sports nutrition supplements, and most often sold in powder or capsule formats.

"BCAAs are now moving into RTDs, snack bars, and functional dairy, driven by consumer demand for hydration, energy, recovery, and overall wellness," Michelle

Read more BCAAs: From gym staple to everyday performance enhancer

Teodoro, global food science analyst at Mintel, wrote in the report *Ingredient Watch: Branched-Chain Amino Acids*.[13]

She pointed to snackable formats for on-the-go performance as one growing area for BCAA incorporation. Bars, puddings, and cookies offer practical ways to deliver benefits beyond sports supplements.

In the UK, The London Dough Co. Doughlicious introduced its chocolate chip and banana chunky oat baked cookie dough skillet in 2026, incorporating vegan BCAAs into a dessert-style format. Dairy-based applications are also emerging. In 2025, Arla launched a range of protein puddings in flavours including hazelnut latte, chocolate, and salted caramel, each delivering 20g of protein per serving alongside BCAAs.

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Hydration

From supporting sporting performance to optimising everyday health

Hydration has long been positioned as a key pillar of sports nutrition, traditionally focused on preventing dehydration during prolonged or intense physical activity.

In 2026, however, with sports nutrition increasingly targeting everyday active consumers, hydration is being reframed and repositioned, capturing both attention and shelf space.

Yet to compete in the increasingly crowded space, brands are expanding hydration beyond its traditional role in recovery and performance towards everyday health, energy, and wellbeing, as well as experimenting with both format and function.

This expansion is also reshaping how hydration is framed.

Terms such as “rehydrate”, “rehydration”, “refuel”, and “refuelling” are increasingly used interchangeably, often positioning

hydration as part of recovery and post-activity support rather than a narrow performance tool.

In 2024, Innova Market Insights identified that when it comes to health benefits from food and beverages, hydration was the most desired, and the leading reason consumers gave for purchasing a specific product.[14]

Underhydration vs dehydration: Why the distinction matters

For decades, hydration research within sports nutrition focused primarily on the acute effects of dehydration on exercise performance, shaping athlete guidance and product development.

Now, as non-elite athletes and everyday active consumers alike seek products to support their lifestyles, research is beginning to explore hydration optimisation beyond competitive sport.

Dr Stavros Kavouras is assistant dean and professor of nutrition at Arizona State University and director of the Hydration Science Lab, which studies how water intake impacts health and performance.

According to him, a critical distinction lies between differentiating dehydration from underhydration, a more subtle but widespread state of chronic low fluid intake.

Along with this comes the question of "whether drinking an adequate amount of water vs just drinking enough not to be

thirsty during the day is better for you, or what I call underhydration vs dehydration", he said.

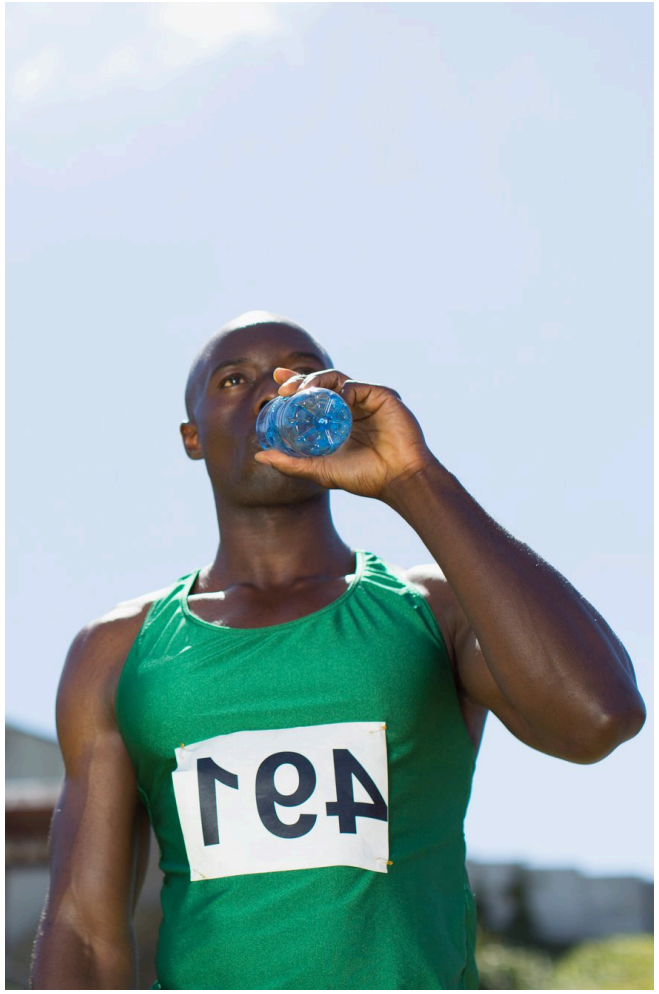
Dehydration is typically acute and clinically recognisable.

Underhydration, Kavouras told *Vitafoods Insights*, is harder to determine, yet it might be the more relevant term to reference when designing hydration products for everyday active consumers.

Electrolytes and everyday hydration

Electrolyte needs increase with sweat loss, which – depending on exercise duration and intensity – can vary drastically. For athletes performing prolonged aerobic activity, maintaining fluid balance is essential.

Hypohydration – defined as a body water deficit caused by acute or chronic dehydration[15] – can impair endurance performance, elevate heart rate, and reduce thermoregulatory efficiency.[16]



Read more Milk permeate linked to improved post-exercise fluid retention

Conversely, excessive electrolyte intake has its own set of health risks, particularly for the kidneys and overall electrolyte homeostasis.

Having too many electrolytes in the body can lead to a host of symptoms, including irregular heart rate, fatigue, muscle cramps, diarrhoea, constipation, nausea, and vomiting, among others.[17]

Asked if this means casual athletes may be overconsuming electrolyte-containing beverages, Kavouras explained that he views this trend as context-dependent rather than inherently problematic.

He did, however, caution against excessive electrolyte consumption, stating that he is not suggesting that every time someone drinks, it should contain electrolytes.

"Electrolytes do play a role in hydration," he said, explaining that electrolytes, particularly sodium, can improve fluid retention and reduce urinary losses

compared to plain water, supporting rehydration efficiency.[18]

"If you consume a fluid that has electrolytes, your body will retain most of it."

One hydration startup, SULT, targets what it defines as the "in-between" consumer with its electrolyte sachets. Its co-founder, Henry Porpora, told *Vitafoods Insights* that its sachets are for everyday consumers who care about their health but also enjoy a beer on a Friday night.

As such, the formulation contains moderate sodium levels (500mg per serving) – enough to effectively hydrate but not so much that it tips over into athlete-focused or high-performance products, which typically contain up to 1g of sodium per serving.[19]

Formulation innovation and substantiation challenges

As hydration products increasingly target a broader consumer base, Kavouras highlighted concerns around scientific substantiation.

In the European Union, health claims linking electrolytes directly to "hydration" are not currently authorised as standalone health claims.

In fact, the only authorised hydration-related health claim from the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA) comes from water:

"Water contributes to the maintenance of normal physical and cognitive function."[20]

"One of the main issues with many of the products [on the market] is that many companies make claims that are not scientifically substantiated," Kavouras said.

These products typically target the needs of elite athletes, and along with high dosages of sodium, also contain high sugar and carbs for quick energy release,

which is typically not needed if not performing at a high level, he explained.

The latest in hydration innovation

Hydration is no longer strictly about replenishment and electrolytes.

As the category grows, and consumers view hydration as a tool to support their broader wellness, brands are under pressure to differentiate.[21]

Hydration stacks

Electrolyte brand Hi Lyte, for example, launched a protein and electrolyte sachet in 2025.

Writing about the launch in a blog post, Hannah Stirling, head of marketing at Nutrition Integrated, said: “Protein has long been the powerhouse in active nutrition and hydration’s quickly becoming as valuable so combining the two feels like a natural next move."

Unlike the usual protein-first formulas,

electrolytes are the hero here; the protein's layered in to elevate functionality."

Tapping into coconut water's hydration potential

Another route for differentiation is in ingredient choice. Coconut water is gaining traction as a natural hydration option due to its inherent electrolyte content, particularly potassium, according to Neha Srivastava, senior patent analyst at Mintel.

However, research suggests coconut water's electrolyte profile on its own may be insufficient for more demanding hydration scenarios – for example, high-intensity exercise, where sodium and overall electrolyte balance become important, she explained in the report *Patent Insights: Innovation Driving Sports Nutrition*.[22,23]

As a result, some product developers are exploring the potential of fortified coconut water.

Srivastava pointed to the company Beijing Meimiao Food Co and its pending patent as one such example. Its concentrated coconut water beverage is targeted toward replenishing nutrients lost during sport.

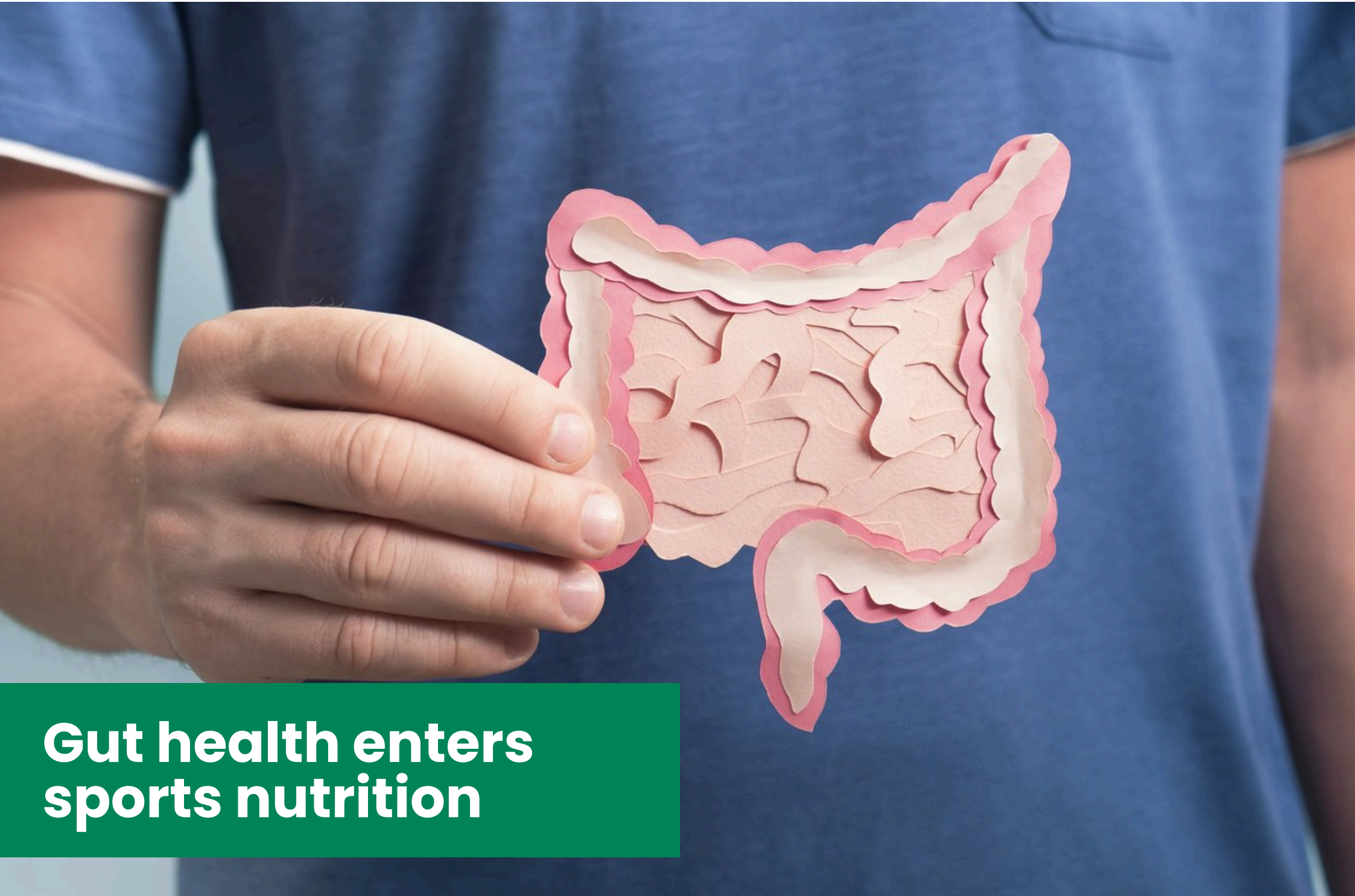
Tablets, chews, and gummies

Other emerging formats include dissolvable tablets, chews, and gummies.

In August 2024, the UK brand Four Five Plus+ Hydro launched its orange-and-mango-flavoured electrolyte tablets, designed to be dissolved in water. The tablets, offering convenience and portability, contain magnesium, alongside vitamins C, B2, B6, and B12.

Mintel also identified the potential for chews or gummies to be developed as hydrating solutions.

Citing trends from adjacent categories, like vitamins and supplements, there are opportunities for brands to innovate in this area, combining hydration with functional benefits such as added vitamins.[24]



Gut health enters sports nutrition

As interest in gut health has gone mainstream, and research continues to grow around the important role the gut plays in every facet of health – from mental health and cognitive function, to metabolism, weight management, chronic diseases, nutrient absorption, and physical function – it comes as no surprise that the relationship between the gut microbiota and sports performance, recovery, and long-term health is now in the spotlight.

Junior Carlone is completing his PhD in kinesiology and sports science at the University of Verona in Italy, and is lead author of a systematic scoping review entitled "The performance gut: a key to optimising performance in high-level athletes".[25]

He sat down with *Vitafoods Insights* to talk about the gut microbiota and sports nutrition.

How sport type and training shape the gut microbiota

Carlone explained that gut microbiota composition appears to vary, not only between individuals, but depending on the type of sport practised and the specific metabolic demands of training and competition.

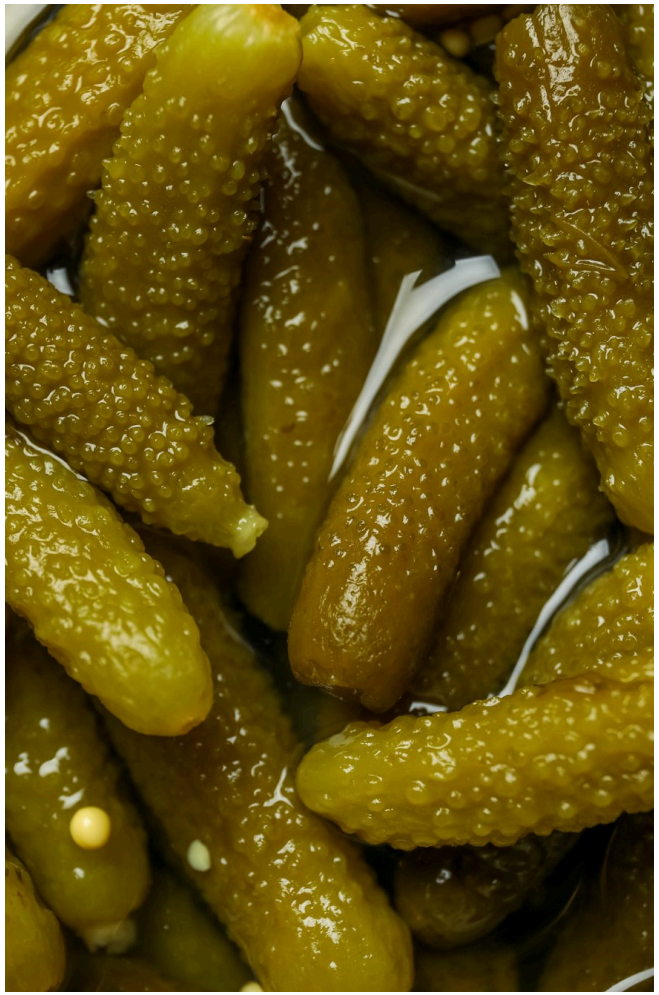
"Endurance athletes, for instance, tend to exhibit greater microbial diversity

compared to sedentary individuals, with bacterial profiles that favour energy metabolism and the production of bioactive metabolites, such as short-chain fatty acids," he said.

By contrast, athletes in strength, power, and combat sports appear to show different microbial characteristics, shaped by the demands of repeated high-intensity effort, protein turnover, and inflammation management.[26]

"Current research suggests that each sport type may be associated with specific gut microbiota characteristics, although further research is needed to precisely define these patterns," he said.

For the industry, this distinction is important, as the presence of these sport-specific microbiota trends does not mean there is a clear blueprint for formulation or supplementation, particularly given that between individuals, the variability gut microbiota remains high.



Read more Reimagining pickle juice as a muscle cramp shot for elite athletes

Intestinal health for optimal performance

Beyond microbiota composition, intestinal health has become an important focus in sports nutrition, Carlone explained.

"It plays a significant role in modulating immune responses and recovery processes, regulating energy metabolism and athletic performance," he said.

This relevance is especially pronounced for athletes and highly active individuals, for whom maintaining optimal physiological function is essential for peak performance.

"Intestinal health is an essential factor for athletes who may experience gastrointestinal disturbances that can compromise performance, recovery, nutrient absorption, and overall health," Carlone added.

Microbiome-based personalisation

Microbiome-based nutritional personalisation appears to be a promising

avenue but remains experimental, Carlone said.

A central challenge is the lack of agreement on what constitutes an “optimal” microbiota across different sports or training phases.

The gut microbiota is dynamic by nature, meaning it is influenced by training load, diet, recovery, stress, and competition schedules.

This temporal variability means that meaningful interpretation often requires repeated sampling, which is not always viable.

Practical applications, on the other hand, remain limited to recommendations based on broad patterns and are therefore not truly precise or personalised.

For now, true personalisation will probably depend on integrating microbiome data with multi-omics data, which combines

metabolic, inflammatory, and physiological markers to better reflect individual context, Carlone suggested.[27]

The risk of over-claiming

As gut health gains visibility in consumer-facing sports nutrition products, Carlone identified over-claiming as one of the most significant risks.

"The main risks associated with over-claiming in scientific communication to consumers primarily concern confusion between correlation and causality," he said.

"A second critical aspect may involve inappropriate generalisation, in which results obtained with elite athletes are transferred to recreational individuals with substantially different training patterns, diets, and lifestyles."

Carlone also warned against excessive simplification, which can obscure the complexity of microbiota–host interactions

and create unrealistic expectations.

"There may be an underestimation of individual variability, neglecting that response to gut microbiota interventions also depends on baseline microbial composition, host genetics, and multiple environmental factors, including the first 1,000 days of life," he said.

Foundational behaviours before supplementation

Interest in gut-targeted nutraceuticals is growing, and despite the supportive role supplementation can have in health, Carlone stressed that foundational behaviours remain central and extremely important to microbiota health and performance outcomes.

"It is essential to emphasise that physical activity, structured exercise, and adequate nutrition are the pillars of microbiota health and of optimising health and athletic performance, even before nutraceutical supplementation," he said.

When applied correctly and personalised appropriately, these interventions have demonstrated consistent, reproducible benefits that are supported by scientific evidence.

"To avoid the risk of overclaiming, consulting sector experts is recommended," he added.

The future role of gut health in sports nutrition

Looking ahead, Carlone expects gut health to become more practically integrated into sports nutrition strategies, supported by more accessible and validated gut microbiota analysis tools. "The approach will probably shift toward an integrated vision that considers metabolic health, immune function, and digestive wellbeing as essential components of athlete longevity," he said.

He believes future approaches are likely to adopt a more holistic framework, linking microbiota data with other biomarkers to

inform nutritional strategies tailored to training phase, sport type, and individual characteristics.

At the same time, he cautioned against unnecessary intervention.

“A challenge will be distinguishing between physiological variations in microbiota and true dysbiosis, while avoiding unnecessary manipulations that could interfere with natural homeostatic mechanisms,” he said.

In terms of research, the gut microbiome’s role in sport is still evolving. While still in its infancy, it is beginning to influence sports nutrition product development.

Researchers at the Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering, for example, analysed the gut microbiome of elite endurance athletes to identify microbial features associated with high physical performance.

One bacteria strain, *Veillonella*, was found at higher levels in runners' microbiomes, and demonstrated enhanced exercise performance in mouse models.

The research led to the development of FitBiomics in 2019, a line of “athlete-derived” probiotics designed to modulate the gut microbiome in ways that can support both performance and overall health.[28]

Key takeaways

- **Everyday active consumers are playing a key role in shaping the sports nutrition market, and formulators are having to adapt products to prioritise taste, texture, moderate dosing, and convenience.**

- **High-protein innovation and products carrying related claims have risen sharply. Texture and flavour are critical differentiators, with negative sensory experiences strongly influencing consumer reviews and repeat purchases.**

- **Following protein's shift beyond powders, creatine and BCAAs are moving into more convenient formats, including bars, RTDs, dairy, gummies, and snacks.**

- **Hydration and hydrating products are expanding to everyday users. While electrolytes remain central and associated with sports nutrition, experts caution against excessive intake.**

- **Gut health is entering sports nutrition strategy, but experts warn against overclaiming and stress the importance of foundational behaviours before supplementation.**

Vitafoods Insights Webinar Series

Webinar Calendar 2026

The Vitafoods Insights Webinar Series covers key nutraceutical market topics, offering attendees the opportunity to get up to speed on market trends, consumer insights, and ingredient innovations to create effective formulations.

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