

HEALTH, VALUE-ADDED

Thanks to research, there's compelling evidence that protein-rich pulses offer many benefits to human health and disease prevention. Consumers are listening. Processors are thinking big.



Chris Marinangeli, Pulse Canada's Director of Nutrition, Scientific and Regulatory Affairs

What position do pulses occupy in the minds of Canadian consumers? That quickly became evident in the early spring of 2020, when the country's COVID-related lockdowns began. Supermarket shelves full of canned and dry pulses were stripped bare almost overnight.

What was it about pulses that resonated so strongly with consumers at that moment? To Dr. Chris Marinangeli, it was likely several things at once.

"Canadians know legumes as a source of protein that's nutritious, shelf-stable and inexpensive," said Marinangeli, Pulse Canada's Director

of Nutrition, Scientific and Regulatory Affairs and a Registered Dietitian.

While many consumers see pulses as highly nutritious, they might not know that pulses have been shown to reduce risk factors linked to heart disease, diabetes and other conditions that pose high risk to human health.

A major focus of pulse research in recent years has been gathering data on this pulse/health connection. In one study, pulse consumption was linked to lower blood pressure, lower blood sugar and lower cholesterol. In fact, it was found that eating just $\frac{3}{4}$ cup per day of pulses can lower LDL, the so-called 'bad cholesterol', by 5%.

Pulses-for-health is a topic that's front and centre in the public advocacy work Debra McLennan does. McLennan, a Registered Dietitian, is the Food & Nutrition Coordinator for Alberta Pulse Growers.

"Health and healthy eating will continue to be the pull for consumers to look at pulses more often," McLennan said. "Consumers feel a strong attraction to protein, and pulses allow consumers to get healthy, plant-based protein that's also easy on the budget."

For an example of the value of health-related research, McLennan points to oats. Thirty years ago, new research found significant health benefits from consuming oatmeal and oat fibre. Overnight, oats went from stodgy breakfast staple to new-age superfood.

"It's not the research data that consumers latch onto, but the stories you can build around it," McLennan explained. "We have the opportunity to do the same with pulses."

A new version of Canada's Food Guide, released in January 2019, was a milestone on the journey of pulses to becoming an everyday source of high-quality protein for Canadians.



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As Marinangeli explained, the Guide now takes a more comprehensive approach to proteins. Previously, non-animal proteins were labelled as ‘alternatives’, which was a difficult term for consumers to navigate. Marinangeli considers that having animal and plant proteins on a more even footing is a positive for the pulse industry.

“With the creation of a protein group, plant protein foods are positioned as healthy and nutrient-dense protein foods without the qualifier that they are an ‘alternative’ to something else,” he said.

“This re-framing of protein in Canada’s Food Guide to be more comprehensive better reflects the latest science around healthy dietary patterns.”

Canadian consumers seem prepared to embrace health-related messaging about pulses as a high-quality protein source. Pulses fuel an active lifestyle today and help prevent significant health issues in the future.

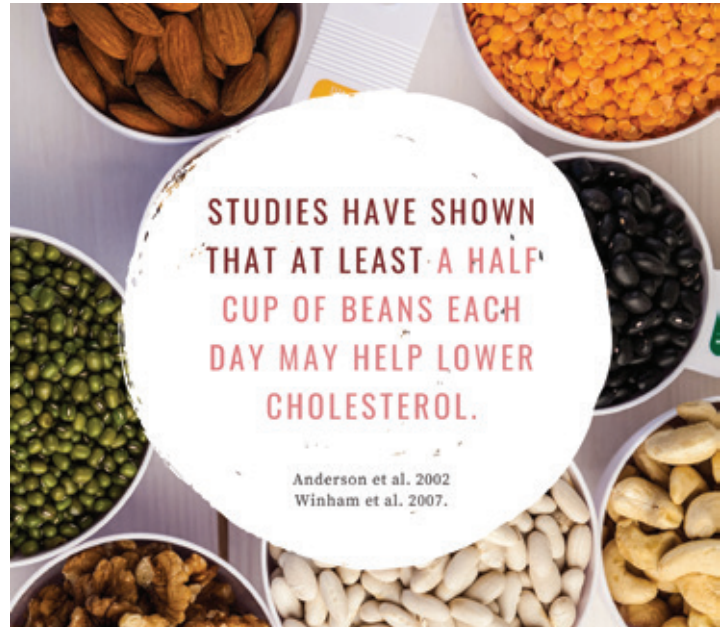
Food manufacturers are taking note and investing accordingly. One APG-funded research project is examining how best to process yellow peas, red lentils, Kabuli chickpeas and navy beans into pulse flours. These flours and other ingredients can be the backbone

of new food products that deliver the nutritional kick of pulses, with consumer convenience.

Peas, in particular, have drawn the attention of ingredient makers and food manufacturers. Such companies view peas as a cost-effective crop that fractionates easily.

Beyond pulses’ health credentials, processing more in Canada would boost economic activity, employment, farmer income and the nation’s balance of trade. That’s a development applauded by McLennan.

“Instead of shipping peas overseas in raw form, and buying them back in processed form later, let’s have more of this value-added in Canada,” she said. “We can sell whole pulses, but also dry pulses, canned pulses, flour and fractions that can be used in processing.”



Today, chronic disease affects millions of lives in Canada, and adds billions of dollars to the country’s health costs. Those who enjoy good health, meanwhile, want to keep it going.

Backed by health research that aligns well with consumer sentiment, pulses can take aim at a bigger share of consumers’ protein buying.

“We are part of a global discussion on the health benefits of getting more of our protein from plants,” Marinangeli said, “and consumers are listening.”