



## Technology & Innovation

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### Beefing up the health benefits in ruminant meat

January 18, 2006



When research is completed and the verdict on health benefits tallied, beef, dairy and other ruminant producers are hoping CLA will be as recognizable a buzzword as Omega 3.

Meanwhile, organizations like the Beef Information Centre (BIC) with the CLA Network are busy spreading the word on the potential of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) – a naturally occurring “good trans fat” found in the gut of animals including cows and sheep. While yet to be substantiated, indicators show the fat may be vital on two fronts – displacement of bad fat and as an agent fighting the growth of cancer cells.

“Research is really in its very early phase,” said Marg Thibeault, BIC national communications manager. “But it has been demonstrating some exciting potential. The first step to be taken in Canada was the joining of researchers and partners including the BIC and formation of the CLA Network.

“At this point we can’t make any definitive health claims, given the strict guidelines of Health Canada. We need more evidence. But animal and model studies to date have shown that CLA may be very potent at reducing cancer cell growth. Once we are able to verify claims that CLA consumption will help protect against chronic diseases, what you have is a designer food – like the Omega 3 eggs and different varieties of fish (like salmon) with high levels of Omega 3.”

In addition to intensive research needed to substantiate health benefit claims, Thibeault said it is essential to dispel the popular mindset that all fats are bad – getting consumers to understand that Omega 3 and CLA are elements of a healthy diet.

The Network is doing cohort studies, looking at the dairy and meat consumption (from ruminant animals) of a large group of people, making comparisons on breast and colon cancer rates and ultimately drawing conclusions.

“When CLA becomes synonymous with Omega 3, you get something of a halo effect,” she said. “Then come the marketing opportunities – to create beef with greater amounts of CLA. Ultimately, it’s the consumer that tells the industry – producers and processors – what they want.

“Consumers will tell us what they want to buy and just how much they’ll pay for it. That will be a signal for processors to say ‘yes, this is a niche market with potential. Now I need to send the signal back about the consumer response.’ When consumers step into the market, that is what drives the product.”

Thibeault said considerably more research on the human side is required, in addition to studies on marketing and public acceptance.

Research conducted at the U.S. Dairy Forage Center in Madison, Wisconsin has shown that CLA levels are nearly four times higher in milk from dairy cows grazing pasture grasses and from cows that had soybean oil added to their conventional diets.

“It’s very early days,” said Thibeault. “But when you think of designer foods already out there, this is very exciting for us.

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With producer support for ongoing research and the development of the CLA network, BIC has been distributing information on potential health benefits to consumers and to about 7,000 registered dieticians throughout Canada.

The most obvious benefit to producers is that CLA occurs naturally, found in fairly significant amounts only in foods produced from ruminants. It is produced in the rumen when certain rumen bacteria changes the structure (conjugation) of free linoleic acid contained in feeds and forages.

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