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US military may 'shock and awe' omega-3 market

By Mike Stones, 02-Feb-2010

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A multi-million dollar omega-3 market could open up within two-to-three years if the US Department of Defense (DOD) orders its troops to take EPA and DHA omega 3 fatty acids.

The department is considering either supplementing or fortifying the rations of all active service personnel in order to enhance stress resilience and general wellness leading to improved military performance, to cut hospital bills and to speed recovery from traumatic brain injuries (TBI).

A spokesperson for the department told NutraIngredientsUSA.com that: *"There are discussions at many levels about the addition of the omega-3, especially in combat-feeding and/or clinical setting (eg TBI) but they are discussions at this point in time."*

Although the department has no official view about the benefits of omega-3s, its Dietary Supplements Committee is working with Samuelli Institute based in Alexandria, Virginia, to explore the military benefits of their use.

Nutritional armor

Of particular concern for military planners are the high rates of depression and suicide together with physical/mental stress associated with combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The military application of omega-3s was the subject of a conference, entitled *'Nutritional armor for the warfighter: can omega-3 fatty acids enhance stress resilience, wellness, and military performance?'* staged last December.

Adam Ismail, executive director of the Global Organization for EPA and DHA Omega 3s (GOED), who attended the conference told NutraIngredients.com: *"I think omega-3s have a vital role to play for the US military. Fortification would be a cheap way of achieving big health care savings, improving military performance and saving lives through helping TBIs."*

Omega-3s have been shown to have an impact in four of the five top areas for which soldiers receive hospital treatment: Depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, pregnancy and surgical complications, he added.

The most logical delivery form would be fortification not supplementation, said Ismail. But a US military directive prohibiting the military from providing any pharmaceutical or supplement pill via the food supply chain would have to be rescinded.

Ismail said he believed the military could fortify the rations of all active service personnel within two-to-three years but first military nutritionists want to see more scientific research to identify the contribution EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) could make.

Personal decision

Meanwhile, change would be led by increasing numbers of individual soldiers taking the personal decision to take omega-3 supplements.

Douglas MacKay, vice president, scientific and regulatory affairs, Council for Responsible Nutrition said: *"Increasing omega-3 consumption amongst US troops has incredible potential to improve health and reduce health care costs for US troops. There is evidence that higher levels of omega-3 fats have multiple health benefits, some of which are particularly important for soldiers."*

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