Both internationally and on local shores, interest in healthy food ingredients continues to grow exponentially. This rings particularly true for alternative dairy ingredients that can potentially be linked to additional health benefits, such as reducing obesity and heart-healthy diets. Now a revolutionary process for natural dairy-based ingredients can help address these consumer health and dietary concerns, by lowering the cholesterol content of these products.

The Benelact process, developed by the US-based Alliance Enterprises, is a proprietary procedure that was introduced in 2007 in response to increased consumer demand for healthy food options. It is a completely natural process that has been found in testing to cut milk’s cholesterol content by about 90% – depending on the product’s fat content. The process is said to reduce the cholesterol in skim milk by 90% and that of full-fat milk by 35%.

Benelact offers great flexibility and can be used for fluid and powder formats, with a wide range of fat contents; dairy products such as cheese, ice cream, butter and yogurt, as well as for secondary ingredient in soups, chocolates, beverages and a variety of consumer-packaged products. Further reductions in cream are also being achieved with cream, according to DairyReporter.com.
A natural process

The process is said to extract cholesterol from milk without altering its taste, texture and natural goodness – a definite plus point when it comes to consumer preferences. This creates a healthier milk product which can be consumed directly or can also be used as an ingredient in other dairy-based food products to produce healthy alternatives without sacrificing taste.

Unlike other dairy products and processes, Benelact does not use chemicals, plant sterols and preservatives. It’s an all-natural process that maintains and protects the natural richness, flavor and nutrients of milk products.

Although the process is very natural, it is highly technical and involves mechanical mixing and separating. The process combines mixing and separating operations, and adds natural oils to the milk, according to the manufacturer. During the ongoing processing, these oils work to “grab” and then separate cholesterol from the actual milk under controlled temperature conditions.

As temperatures and other factors are controlled throughout the process, proteins, calcium and vitamins are left undisturbed. Since none of the flavour is lost, no taste-enhancing additives are required.

In order to develop Benelact into a product capable of meeting changing consumer demand, Alliance Enterprises said that it had to address a number of key concerns. One of the challenges is to create an unadulterated milk that does not have any adverse organoleptic effects. In addition, the challenge is also to not introduce “unnatural” components into a natural food.

A local problem

Like other Western countries, many South Africans suffer the risk of high cholesterol. A whopping 80% of westernised South Africans have raised blood cholesterol, of which 20% have levels that place them at high risk of developing heart disease, according to the Heart and Stroke Foundation.
For the majority of people, their cholesterol level is determined by both hereditary and dietary factors. Some people have naturally high blood cholesterol levels, due to a hereditary condition known as familial hypercholesterolaemia (FH). The first step of lowering cholesterol should always be dietary intervention, suggests the Foundation. The main focus should be on lowering fat (especially saturated) intake. This is where dairy with lowered cholesterol levels can play a pivotal role.

The good and the bad
High density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, also known as the “good” cholesterol, helps clear excess cholesterol from the blood back to the liver. The lower the HDL level, the higher the risk for heart disease. Low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, or “bad” cholesterol, is found in the fatty deposits in the arteries and can contribute to heart disease.

If you have high total cholesterol, it is important to know what type of cholesterol is high. It is better to have a normal or low LDL and high HDL cholesterol than a high LDL and a low HDL. Your doctor can perform this simple test.

Dairy is good for you
A healthy lifestyle should include low-fat dairy products to lower the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) associated with poor kidney function, suggests new research from the US. The study, published in the July 2008 issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, adds to an ever growing body of evidence of the contribution of low-fat dairy to an overall healthy diet. According to results of the Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (Mesa), the researchers stated that a “healthy diet” should consist of low-fat dairy, whole grains, fish, fruit and vegetables, and nuts. – NUTRAingredients.

(Sources available from the author.) M&J