

AJINOMOTO. Amino acids in sports drinks



Ajinomoto Sales and Marketing Manager Satoshi Yokota (left) spoke in some detail at the Global Soft Drinks Congress this spring on the vibrant and growing sports drinks market in Japan. Often an indicator of trends to come, this market has a healthy 10% devoted to sports drinks volume — that is well over 2 billion litres of sports drinks each year.

"Sports drinks consumption per person in Japan currently stands at 10 litres per annum, five times higher than the European average.

"Consumption of sports drinks in Japan has grown significantly over the last six years — 22.4% higher in 2004 than in 1999. This buoyant sector has been driven by consumer awareness of amino acids and interest in their benefits," explained Yokota.

This sector includes **The Coca-Cola Company's** successful Aquarius brand, which in Japan contains the amino acid arginine. Nutritional balance products and functional sports drinks have both shown impressive growth from relatively small bases.

"Functional drinks with amino acids have grown to 380% of their 1999 level, while the smaller nutritional balance sector has more than doubled. Functional and nutritional drinks together account for 39% of the sports drink market.

"There is no single reason for the success of amino acid sports drinks in Japan but, of the key elements which have contributed to sector growth, the first of these is the scientific underpinning of these products through an established programme of clinical trials and regular scientific symposia. Ajinomoto regularly undertakes trials with human volunteers as part of its ongoing investigation into the benefits of amino acids. A global library on amino acid science is available to scientists and business partners.

"The results of this research indicate that intake of branched chain amino acids before or during training improve stamina and after training help speed recovery from fatigue.

Glutamate provides the main source of energy for the digestive system, while arginine accelerates muscle protein synthesis. All results indicate that those who receive supplemental amino acids have lower blood lactic acid levels and so are less easily fatigued.

"Amino Vital from Ajinomoto is available in a variety of packs and formulations to suit sports drink consumers — from the average person who wants to keep fit to the serious competitor.

"Regular Amino Vital has 2,600 mg of amino acids while Amino Vital Pro has a higher dose of 3,600 mg. Amino Vital Water competes in the functional sports drinks sector, delivering 1,000 mg per serving and the pouch pack an increasingly popular format, 1500 mg."

Last year two of Japan's top athletes used Amino Vital as part of their training programme. Mr Murobushi won the Olympic gold medal in the hammer (left) and Kosuke Kitajima a gold medal in breaststroke (below left).

Other amino acid drinks include Amino Supli from **Kirin Beverages** — communications at its launch indicated that it was designed to improve strength, help maintain healthy skin, burn fat and help with concentration and recovery from hangovers — and Amino Shiki from **Suntory**, which contains five amino acids for burning fat and bears the claim "with Ajinomoto amino acids".

Amino Calpis from the **Calpis Company** contains 1,000 mg amino acids per serving. Vaam from **Meiji Dairies**, contains 17 amino acids for burning fat and improving stamina, comes in a pouch pack and is particularly low in calories.

According to Yokota, ten years ago awareness of amino acids was very low — at only 5-6%. Since 1995, there has been a high level of consumer and media interest, such that awareness now stands at over 80%. A UK survey recently revealed that 77% of respondents were aware of amino acids.

In Denmark, Finland, France, Germany and Greece amino acids are not permitted in fortified foods. Further information on this and many aspects of amino acids are available on the website www.ajinomoto.be.

Recent developments in Asia are showing that interest in amino acids is not just a Japanese phenomenon. Koreans for instance use amino acids to treat fatigue. In Taiwan and Indonesia, glutamine is added to baby food to increase infant weight and improve nutrient uptake.

In the US, a marketing programme to introduce Amino Vital to American sports enthusiasts began last year. Its basis in science, alongside partnerships with drinks manufacturers, athletes, nutritionists and scientists are all key to its success, as is good communication. Consumer trials have shown consumers coming back for more.

Satoshi Yokota sees the understanding of amino acids as growing in much the same way as the understanding of vitamins.

"We expect this to be driven by scientific progress, the growing consumer interest in nutrition and more people taking an interest in sport. Soft drink companies will take the opportunity that amino acids offer, to develop beneficial and profitable products, with the result that consumers will learn yet more about these ingredients."

