

US Supplement Sales Rise Sharply during First Six Months of 2020

COVID-19 pandemic boosts sales of medicinal fungi and herbs commonly used for immune health

By Tyler Smith

As the coronavirus spread across the globe in early 2020,¹ news reports in the United States reflected a growing sense of dread in the country. At the time, very little was known about the virus or COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2. When confronted with a potentially deadly infectious disease and no available treatment, many people in the United States turned to natural products, as evidenced by skyrocketing sales of dietary supplements, including herbal products, in early 2020. The increased sales were fueled largely by consumers' seeking immune support and general wellness products.² Sales were also impacted, in part, by pantry-stocking or even "panic buying" of immune products,³ which led to depleted inventories, backordered products, and other supply chain disruptions during this time.⁴

Overall dietary supplement sales in March 2020 were up 39% from March 2019, and by mid-June, sales* were still up 14% compared to the previous year, according to SPINS data.² As much of the country was under some form of stay-at-home order during this time, online sales far outpaced brick-and-mortar sales.⁵ NBJ predicts that total online sales in 2020 will be 61.4% higher than in 2019; in-store sales are expected to rise by only 7.1% in 2020.²

Total dietary supplement sales estimates for 2020 are similarly optimistic, with NBJ predicting the highest level of sales growth in more than two decades. Sales of cold, flu, and immunity products are predicted to grow 51.2% from 2019, perhaps making up close to 10% of total dietary supplement sales in 2020, according to SPINS data.²

The information below is based on herbal supplement sales data from January 1, 2020, to June 22, 2020, provided by the market research firm SPINS. Sales growth refers to the total percentage sales increase for this period compared to the same period in 2019.

Popular Herbal Immune Products

Unsurprisingly, sales of herbal supplements marketed for immune health experienced strong growth during the first half of 2020. A handful of ingredients experienced sales increases above 70% in both mainstream and natural channels, including well-known herbs such as elderberry, echinacea, and oil of oregano (*Origanum vulgare*, Lamiaceae).

Sales of elderberry, which has been shown to reduce upper-respiratory symptoms in clinical trials,⁶ grew by 126% in the natural channel. In the mainstream channel, elderberry sales increased by 241.4%. Sales of echinacea, which has been used traditionally for various immune-related benefits, also grew sharply in the first half of 2020. Echinacea sales in the natural channel grew by 70.2%, and sales in the mainstream channel grew by 90.9%. A 2014 Cochrane Review concluded that preparations of echinacea had potential cold-prevention benefits, but the trending-positive results were not statistically significant.⁷ A more recent systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2019 made similar conclusions, noting that echinacea "might have a preventative effect on the incidence of upper respiratory tract infections."⁸ Oregano has been used traditionally for various medicinal purposes, including for respiratory symptoms such as cough.⁹ Although oregano has been shown to have antimicrobial and antiviral properties in vitro, human clinical trials are lacking.¹⁰ Sales of this herb

* For the four-week period that ended June 14, 2020.

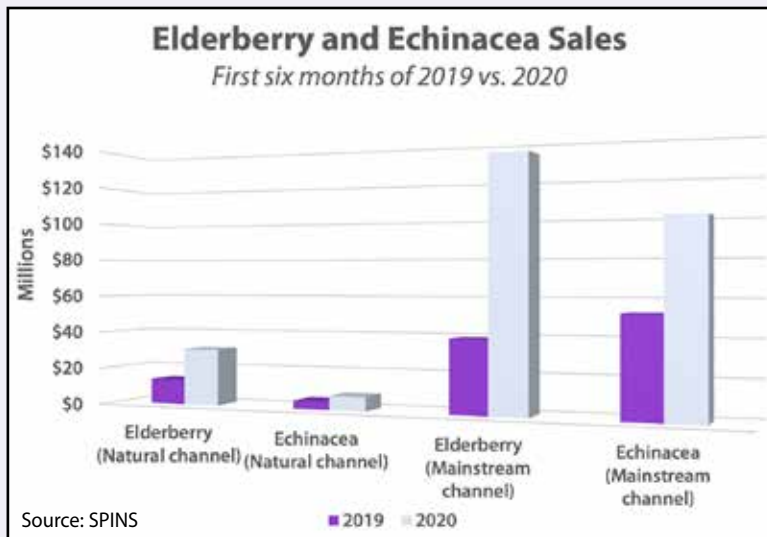
— primarily in essential oil form — grew by 74.8% in the natural channel and 90.6% in the mainstream channel in the first half of 2020.

Less common herbs with potential immune health benefits also fared well in the first six months of 2020, including astragalus (*Astragalus* spp., Fabaceae) root, elecampane (*Inula helenium*, Asteraceae), and lomatium (*Lomatium* spp., Apiaceae). A 2015 Cochrane Review of astragalus for preventing frequent respiratory tract infections in children found 120 relevant, full-text studies; however the studies were deemed to be of poor quality and none met the review authors' inclusion criteria.¹¹ Elecampane and lomatium also are used traditionally for respiratory conditions, but human clinical trials are lacking.^{12,13}

Medicinal Fungi

Mushrooms and fungi-derived ingredients have been used in traditional Chinese medicine for centuries,¹⁴ and their popularity as medicine has increased in the United States in recent years. Mushroom and fungal products first appeared on the list of 40 top-selling ingredients in the natural channel in 2015, and sales have increased steadily since then. SPINS tracks multiple mushroom species, and the traditional uses and claimed benefits vary for each, often with some overlap. Immunity and general health benefits were the most common health focuses of mushroom supplements sold in the United States in 2018 and 2019.

In the first half of 2020, in both mainstream and natural retail channels, six of the 40 ingredients (15%) with the largest sales growth were fungal products (including



beta-glucans). Of these, five appeared in both channels, two of which experienced sales increases greater than 70% in 2020: shiitake (*Lentinula edodes*, Omphalotaceae) and “mushrooms (other).” As noted previously, the mushrooms (other) category includes any fungal product not individually tracked by SPINS, such as turkey tail. Sales of mushrooms (other) increased by 84.0% in the natural channel and a remarkable 494.6% in the mainstream channel. Shiitake, extracts of which have exhibited immunomodulatory, antibacterial, antifungal, antioxidant, and cytotoxic properties in vitro,¹⁵ has been used for a wide range of medicinal purposes, including as an adjuvant cancer treatment¹⁶ and immune system modulator.¹⁷ Shiitake sales increased by 125.4% in the natural channel and 74.9% in the mainstream channel.

Conclusion

Although sales of dietary supplements in the first half of 2020 benefited largely from immune health ingredients, sales of other ingredients have increased as well, particularly those related to stress and sleep. As of mid-June 2020, supplement sales appear to have leveled off after the sales jumps seen earlier in the year.⁵ The future course of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States is uncertain, which makes predicting sales for the second half of 2020 challenging. However, if the first half of 2020 is any indication, then the herb and dietary supplement industry appears to be on track for another record-breaking year. HG

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Elderberry *Sambucus nigra*
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