

SUPPLEMENTS

Melatonin: Cashing In On Publicity

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WESTLAKE VILLAGE, Calif.—It's being touted as a miracle sleeping aid, the ultimate antioxidant, and a pill that may slow the effects of aging and improve the body's immune system response. It's melatonin, and it's making news again.

Melatonin has come and gone from the public's radar screen once before. But this time around, melatonin is poised to become a hot product, perhaps the hottest product of the '90s. Question is, is your store ready?

Since about 1990, the natural foods industry has sold melatonin, primarily as a sleeping aid, according to Marcia Zimmerman, a Westlake Village, Calif.-based consultant who has studied the hormone for some time. Melatonin got its first splash in the national press a few years ago when magazines such as *Conde Nast Traveler* and *U.S. News & World Report* reported on its use as a cure for jet lag. Between 1992 and 1994, melatonin rode a wave of positive press toward success. However, popularity didn't come without controversy.

Urged by some of its members, the NNFA at one point cautioned retailers against selling melatonin. A leading researcher, Richard Wurtman, appeared on talk shows late in 1994 to advise consumers to wait for FDA approval before rushing out to buy. Wurtman's motives may not have been entirely altruistic, however, considering that his company, Interneuron Pharmaceutical, owns several patents on uses of melatonin.

Zimmerman says many retailers worried that melatonin was a drug-like substance and

were concerned that it would be regulated as such. In fact, it is a nutrient and the *Merck Index* lists it as a hormone, she says. Zimmerman says she believes FDA has no basis for regulating melatonin because after more than 30 years of research a toxic dose has not been found. In the past two or three years, Zimmerman says, she's seen a shift in favor of melatonin among natural foods retailers. Those who weren't carrying it before, now are.

Since early 1995, media sources from *Vogue* to the *LA. Times* to National Public Radio have run a story on melatonin, spurring what Marshall Post, senior marketing associate for a Ronkonkoma, N.Y.-based supplement manufacturer, calls not an uptick but an "avalanche" in demand. An article in the Aug 7, 1995, issue of *Newsweek* started the most recent avalanche, stating, "Proven or not, melatonin is poised to become one of the hottest pills of the decade."

How can natural foods retailers maximize sales of a supplement such as melatonin that has generated major publicity? Start by getting informed and staying informed, experts say.

In the case of melatonin, retailers should have a copy of the *Newsweek* article noted above and watch for related articles. One or more staff members can be appointed to keep a media watch. Another great tool for acquiring media information is using an on-line clipping service that will search for topics of interest and gather appropriate articles for later reading.

Before purchasing melatonin, retailers should learn about the differences between natural and synthetic melatonin. It can take thousands of cows to produce even a tiny

amount of the hormone. Talk to your suppliers. "Educating the retailer is an important part of any business," says Bill Sheppard, a formulator for a Parker, Cola-based supplement company. "Companies should do more than just sell you, they should support you with background materials and other information you can use to educate yourself, your staff and your customers."

REFERENCES

A half dozen books on melatonin for a general audience came out in 1995, as well as several scholarly works. Following are some of the resources available:

- * *Melatonin*, Russ Reiter, Bantam/Doubleday/ Dell
- * *Melatonin: Nature's Steeping Pill*, Ray Sahelian, Be Happier Press
- * *Melatonin: The Anti-Aging Hormone*, Suzanne LeVert, Avon
- * *Melatonin Miracle: Nature's Sex-Enhancing, Disease-Fighting, Age-Reversing Hormone*, Pierpaoli et al., Simon & Schuster Trade
- * *Melatonin Report*, Billie J. Sahley, Pain & Stress Therapy Center Publications
- * *Stay Young the Melatonin Way*, Steven J. Bock, Dutton