

Sodium Reduction in the U.S. Food Supply:

An Overview from Healthcare Professionals,
Government, Media and the Foodservice Industry



Sodium is essential—not only for human health but also for the health of the food industry. Unfortunately, Americans consume too much of it. This overconsumption has consequences, including premature deaths and high healthcare costs amounting to over 75 million dollars a year. Numerous human clinical trials now provide significant scientific evidence that most Americans can improve their health by reducing their sodium intake, and that consumers need support from the food industry in order to achieve these reductions.

Introduction

According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 Advisory Committee Report*, reducing sodium intake is among the top dietary priorities for the nation. As a leader in food, nutrition and healthcare public relations, we at Pollock understand the science behind key nutrition issues, such as sodium content, that impact brands. We've devised this Pollock Perspective from our team of registered dietitians and food experts to take an in-depth look at sodium from a health, industry, policy and media outlook. Understanding the issues is the first step toward identifying opportunities. We hope you find our perspective useful in your marketing and communications efforts.

The Salt Challenge

The challenge facing the food industry, government, healthcare professionals, and consumers is how to best reduce sodium intake to levels that promote health and wellness while still providing foods that are safe and taste great.

There are more than 100 sodium-containing compounds commonly used in the food supply, and changes in how we use salt and other sodium-containing ingredients has now reached a tipping point for most major food manufacturers and the foodservice industry. Our research at Pollock Communications shows that reducing sodium is cited as a major consumer concern among dietitians, who feel excess sodium is as harmful as added sugars, while one in five believe that it's worse for health than high fructose corn syrup.

Opportunities exist for all brands, commodity boards and associations to become part of the sodium solution. Companies and organizations for products considered major sodium contributors and those that are entirely sodium-free are communicating with healthcare professionals, media and consumers about sodium. In fact, sodium-rich brands are garnering positive coverage for their manufacturers' efforts to reduce sodium levels in their products. In addition, many naturally low-sodium and sodium-free brands are leveraging the media interest covering the issue.



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Sodium Goes Public

Excess sodium intake in the global and U.S. food supply, as well as the current sodium intake among Americans, is a major public health concern. **At present, some 88 percent of Americans exceed the current government recommendations for sodium, which is linked to more than an estimated 150,000 premature deaths and a healthcare cost of 75 million dollars a year.**

Lowering sodium intake is a top priority to help manage risk for hypertension, stroke and kidney diseases. To achieve recommendations currently set forth by the Institute of Medicine and the soon-to-be-released 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, efforts from government agencies, health professionals, the food industry, restaurant associations, and public and private partnerships will be required.

For nearly half a century, research has shown that sodium poses a health threat, especially for those who are sensitive to it. Sodium and hypertension have been referred to as the “two silent killers” of Americans, and it impacts almost everyone. In fact, the U.S. lifetime risk for developing hypertension is 90 percent. Too much sodium is thought to be responsible for one in six deaths in the United States.

Sodium is associated with hypertension, a form of heart disease that affects one in three adults—75 million people aged 20 or older. High blood pressure increases the risk for heart attack, stroke, and heart and kidney failure. On average, blacks have higher blood pressure than do non-blacks, as well as an increased risk of blood-pressure-related complications (American Heart Association, *Circulation* 2006). Hypertension costs the nation an estimated 73.4 billion dollars in 2009 (Institute of Medicine report). In addition, new research suggests that salt may have other unhealthful properties other than raising blood pressure. **The American Medical Association (AMA) says that 150,000 lives could be saved annually if the salt in processed and restaurant foods was cut in half.**

While 88 percent of Americans exceed the current sodium recommendation of 2,300 mg per day, the average consumption is nearly twice the recommended limit. Based on the NHANES 2003–2006 data sets, the average intake for individuals over two years of age is about 3,400 mg, and the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend a limit of 2,300 mg per day (equal to 5.8 g/d salt or about 1 teaspoon salt). For those with hypertension, older Americans and other higher-risk individuals, the recommended sodium limit is 1,500 mg per day.



Sodium Sources

Sodium is an essential mineral that is the primary regulator of fluid in the body. The body regulates the amount of sodium in the blood via hormones and the kidneys. Salt, the primary source of sodium, is a critical ingredient in the food supply, impacting taste, texture, shelf life, meltability, color and much more. The food industry uses more than 100 different sodium-containing compounds that have myriad functions in foods. Research shows that over the past several decades, there has been a steady increase in the amount of sodium used in the food supply, and this has resulted in the vast majority of the population exceeding all major health organizations' recommended upper limits of the nutrient.



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The vast majority of sodium in the U.S. diet comes from processed foods. In fact, three-fourths of one's total sodium intake is from processed foods. Salt added during cooking or at the table makes up only a fraction of total sodium intake; just some five percent of total sodium intake is from the salt shaker. **The major food sources of sodium in the U.S. diet are foods like sandwiches, pizza, burgers, Mexican and pasta dishes. Together, these foods contribute 44 percent of total sodium intake. Some 16 percent of sodium comes from meat and meat alternatives; 11 percent from grains; nine percent from vegetables; five percent from sweets, four percent fats and oils; three percent milk; three percent salty snacks; and two percent from condiments and beverages.**

Consumer Confusion

Consumers are increasingly concerned about sodium, with nearly two-thirds (65 percent) expressing concern, but nearly 8 in 10 (79 percent) do not know how much sodium they should be eating. The majority of shoppers do not use food labels to check for sodium content information. In addition, the strategy most employed by consumers to cut back on sodium is to reduce their use of the salt shaker, and more than two-thirds of shoppers (78 percent) believe that sea salt is a healthier alternative to table salt. **The lack of knowledge and the misinformation regarding sodium is thought to be one of the main factors in why sodium levels have consistently increased in the U.S. diet—and the reason consumers need increased sodium solutions offered by the food industry as well as the government.**

On April 20, 2010, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a comprehensive report, *Strategies to Reduce Sodium Intake in the United States*. The report states that for several decades, the burden of reducing sodium intake has been on the U.S. consumer, and that this approach has failed. Since three-fourths of sodium consumed is from processed and restaurant foods, the IOM strategies focus

on reductions in sodium from the food supply, where more impact can be achieved. The report outlined, in detail, these primary recommendations for significant sodium reduction in the U.S. diet:

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should set mandatory standards for the sodium content of foods.

The food industry should voluntarily reduce the sodium content of its foods.

Government agencies, public health and consumer organizations, and the food industry should support sodium reduction with nutrition labeling and other programs.

The report urged the FDA to set mandatory standards for food groups for sodium levels and recommends that the generally recognized as safe (GRAS) status be modified, so that it applies only to foods that meet the FDA's sodium standards within their categories.

The National Salt Reduction Initiative (NSRI) was started in 2008 by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and includes the American Medical Association (AMA), the American Heart Association (AHA), the American Public Health Association (APHA), and 45 national health organizations. It is intended to promote gradual, achievable, substantive and measurable reductions in the sodium content of packaged and restaurant foods. **The NSRI goal is to reduce population sodium intake by 20 percent over 5 years, which would require an approximate 25 percent reduction in the sodium content of packaged and restaurant foods.**

The NSRI now has the pledges of more than 20 food manufacturers and restaurant chains, including Starbucks, Subway, Heinz, Kraft, Mars, Inc., Unilever and many others, to meet the goals outlined in the NSRI.



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Foodservice Industry Initiatives

The U.S. foodservice industry is struggling to respond to increasing public health and regulatory pressure to reduce sodium in menu items. The vast majority of sodium (77 percent) in the U.S. diet comes from processed and restaurant foods. Nutrition information from chain restaurants across the country shows that many menu items exceed this maximum in a single serving.

The vast majority of foods served in U.S. restaurants have been manufactured in facilities located far from the restaurants serving the food. Very few menu items are made from scratch in chain restaurants and other volume foodservice operations. As regulatory pressure increases, more and more chain restaurants are working with their suppliers and manufacturing partners to find ways to reduce sodium in existing products, and to create new menu concepts that offer appealing flavors and less sodium. Reformulation is challenging and expensive; there is much more optimism in the industry related to new product development, and consumers tend to react negatively to changes in their favorite products.

Right now, the only good news for the U.S. foodservice industry is that the *2010 Dietary Guidelines Committee Report* and the IOM's *Strategies to Reduce Sodium Intake in the United States* report both recommend a gradual reduction in sodium—versus fast, dramatic reductions that would have negative effects on flavor and consumer acceptance. Many foodservice companies have taken up the charge and are working to reduce sodium in their products.

The Media Views Sodium Reduction as a Serious Issue

Perhaps more than for any nutritional issue in recent years, national media have “shaken” up the food industry with hard-hitting coverage of the health risks of excess dietary salt. By extensively covering leading health advocates, they have thrown down the gauntlet to companies and brands in a challenge to develop lower-salt options quickly, regardless of consumer taste preferences and habits.

The media have covered the dietary salt issue extensively, beginning in April with the IOM report and New York City restaurant regulations, and continuing through August with coverage of the *2010 Dietary Guidelines Scientific Report*, released in June. In fact, the coverage of salt during this time frame was more than double that of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs), demonstrating the urgency and significance of this issue to influential journalists and healthcare providers. Since April, there were more than 300 national and regional newspaper, television and online stories about salt, the majority of which supported the IOM directives.



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As evidence of the depth and breadth of coverage of salt, consider:

Stories emphasized the health risks of excessive salt consumption, most notably heart attack and stroke.

Positive coverage of companies taking proactive steps to lower sodium in advance of new guidelines.

Journalists overwhelmingly relied on experts for credible reporting, including organizations such as the AHA, as well as physicians, registered dietitians and government officials.

Going forward, the media spotlight will likely continue to shine on companies and brands that take proactive steps to lessen the salt content of their products.

Summary

Companies can seize the opportunity timed to the release of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans through innovation, and by communicating their efforts and brand stories through credible, third-party experts who appear in the media, as well as engaging with consumers directly.

To maximize the news coverage and create positive opportunities for brands in response to the IOM report and the 2010 Dietary Guidelines, food manufacturers need to understand the importance of providing useful, real-world solutions and how to communicate through credible spokespersons. Most importantly, brands have the opportunity to give consumers the tools they need to make smart choices and switches at the grocery shelf. Such communication will go far to enhance brand loyalty and reputation in consumers' hearts and minds.

Sodium Terms and Recommendations

Adequate intake: 1,500 mg per day

Upper limit: 2,300 mg per day

FDA Sodium Food Label Guidelines

Free: < 5 mg per serving

Low: < 140 mg per serving

Reduced or Less: 25% less than standard-reference food

Healthy: < 480 mg per serving

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