2010: The Year of Salt

Salt—so familiar, so traditional, so innocent-looking, sitting in salt shakers in every kitchen across America. Yet it may cause more health havoc than trans fat, saturated fat, sugar, food additives, and pesticides—you name it.

We’ve known for a long time that salt raises blood pressure, which, in turn, causes heart attacks, strokes, and kidney disease. Based on the latest research, scientists estimate that reducing sodium sharply could save upwards of 100,000 lives and tens of billions of dollars worldwide each year.

In 2003, the British government began a serious and sophisticated campaign to reduce sodium. It started with a program to publicize the dangers of too much salt. More importantly, it set targets to reduce the sodium levels in more than 80 categories of food.

After just a few years, average sodium intakes dropped by 10 percent, a third of the way to the initial goal of cutting intakes by one-third.

Now the United States may be on the brink of its own salt-reduction campaign. Already, some enlightened companies—including ConAgra, Campbell, and Burger King—have announced that they have made cuts or will soon increase pressure on the food industry by releasing a report on cutting sodium. It is likely to suggest approaches like using salt crystals of different sizes and shapes and replacing some salt with herbs, spices, potassium chloride, amino acids, and more.

The true test of the IOM report will be whether it recommends robust government action. Ideally, the IOM would urge the Food and Drug Administration to collaborate with New York City and other health departments to give the food industry specific targets and deadlines.

And it would recommend that health officials simultaneously begin writing regulations mandating limits or warnings that would kick in if a voluntary approach failed, as it has in the past.

Salt doesn’t just come from the shaker. New York City is asking restaurants and food companies to cut the sodium.

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