CENTER FOR Science IN THE Public Interest

The Salty Sweet Truth About Sodium and Added Sugars

Diet, Chronic Disease, and COVID-19

- Unhealthy dietary patterns, characterized in part by high consumption of sodium and added sugars, are a leading risk factor for mortality due to heart disease and other conditions. Specific dietary risk factors, including high sodium and sugary beverage intake, are estimated to account for a substantial number of deaths in the United States.[1]
- Having chronic conditions related to diet, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure, is associated with increased risk of becoming severely ill from COVID-19.[2,3]

Added Sugars in the Diet

- Added sugars include sugars that are added to foods and beverages during processing. They include foods packaged as sweeteners (table sugar), syrups and honey, and sugars from concentrated fruit or vegetable juices. They do not include naturally occurring sugars that are found in milk, fruits, and vegetables.[4]
- The Daily Value for added sugars established by the Food and Drug Administration is 50 grams per day based on a 2,000-calorie daily diet, equivalent to approximately 12 teaspoons.[5]
- Healthy eating patterns that are relatively lower in added sugars (<50 grams per day) are associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancers.[6,7]
- Unfortunately, American adults consume an average of 17 teaspoons of added sugars per day, about 40 percent more than currently recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.[8]
- The leading source of added sugars in the American diet, accounting for 24 percent of our intake, is sugar-sweetened beverages —like soda, fruit drinks, sports drinks, energy drinks, flavored milk, and sweetened coffee. These are followed closely by desserts and sweet snacks, which account for 19 percent of our added sugars intake.[9]
- Sugary drinks contribute to an increased risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease[10]—in part by leading to weight gain[11]—and are linked to a higher risk of dental cavities.[12]
- Regularly consuming sugary drinks (7 or more servings per week) is associated with a statistically significant 29 percent increase in risk of dying from cardiovascular disease, compared to consuming 1 serving per week or less.[13]

Sodium in the Diet

- Sodium is a mineral added to foods to enhance flavor, increase shelf life, or improve the texture and appearance of food.
- While some sodium is necessary in the diet, eating higher levels of sodium can increase the risk of hypertension, heart disease and stroke.[14]
- The 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that adults limit their sodium intake to 2,300 mg/day (equal to about 1 teaspoon) to reduce the risk of chronic disease.[15]

- However, about 90 percent of people living in the US consume excessive sodium[16], with an average daily intake of 3,393 mg of sodium a day (1 ½ teaspoons), nearly one and a half times the recommended limit.[17]
- Dietary sodium reduction is a recommended strategy for prevention and treatment of hypertension and is supported by the American College of Cardiology, American Heart Association, and other leading medical organizations.[18]
- For people with hypertension, reducing sodium intake from high to low levels can reduce systolic blood pressure by 7-10 mm Hg, a reduction that is comparable to the effects of some medications. [19][20]
- Researchers have estimated that reducing Americans' daily sodium intake by about a third (1,200 mg) would prevent between 44,000 and 92,000 deaths per year from stroke, heart attack, and other causes.[21]
- Even a smaller reduction in sodium of just under 10 percent (350 mg per day) could prevent about 1 million strokes and heart attacks, adding more than 1.3 million years to American's lives.[22]

The Salty, Sweet Truth About Chain Restaurant Foods

- A standard 20 oz Coca-Cola has 65 grams of sugar,[23] equivalent to drinking 16 teaspoons of sugar in one beverage.
- Most soda fountain drinks served by fast-food restaurant chains contain more than a day's worth of added sugars (50 grams):
    - even most "small" drinks contain at least a full day's worth,
    - most "medium" or "regular" drinks contain at least 1 ½ days' worth,
    - and most "large" contain 2 days' worth.[24]
- The average nutrient profile of a default combination meal in the U.S. includes 2,110 milligrams of sodium and 68 grams of sugar, values that approach the recommended daily limit for sodium and exceed the daily limit for added sugars.[25, 26]
- The leading sources of sodium in the American diet, accounting for 71% of overall sodium intake, are from restaurants, prepackaged, and processed foods (as opposed to sodium inherent to a food or added during cooking or at the table).[27]
- The top food type contributing sodium to our diet is sandwiches---including burgers, chicken sandwiches, hotdogs, breakfast sandwiches, sandwiches made with deli meats, and burritos/tacos.[28]
- Restaurant foods have more sodium per calorie compared to food obtained from stores.[29]
- The sodium content in similar menu items at different restaurant chains varies significantly, making it impossible for consumers to know how much sodium they are ordering. [30] For example, a small French fry at Arby's contains 940 mg (41% DV) of sodium[31], where a small French fry at McDonald's contains 180 mg (8% DV).[32]

Warning Icons on Restaurant Menus Show Promise for Reducing Sodium and Added Sugars Consumption

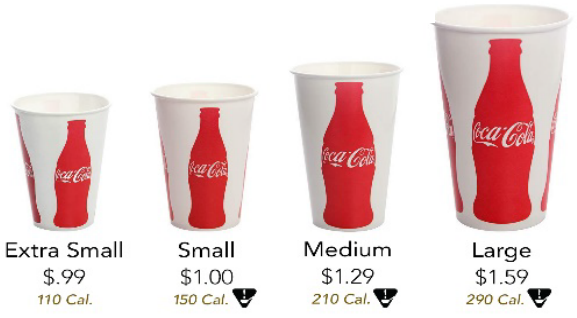
- Sodium and added sugars warnings can increase consumers' knowledge of sodium/added sugars content and lead to lower sodium/added sugars food purchases.[33, 34, 35]
- Requiring restaurants to tell customers what is in their food can motivate them to make foods healthier. When restaurants in King County, Washington were first required to publish the

amount of sodium in their menu items, they changed their recipes, leading to overall reductions in sodium in menu items at sit-down restaurants (but not quick-service restaurants).[36] Further reformulation may be seen with more prominent posting of sodium content through warning icons.

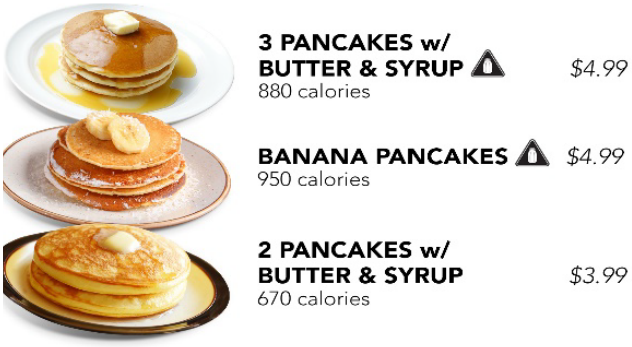
- Months after Chile's adoption of high in [sugar/sodium/saturated fat/calories]" nutrient warnings, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of food and beverages that required at least one "high in" label, from 51% to 44%, with the most frequent reductions found in the proportion of 'high in' sugar and 'high in' sodium products. These changes indicate that food companies may be making changes in formulation to avoid placing warning labels on their products. [37]
- Warning icons provide a pictorial element that make them accessible to low literacy and non-English speaking consumers, providing more equitable access to information.[38, 39]
- A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials found that warnings on sugary drinks can significantly reduce sugary drink purchases.[40]
- Sugar purchased from beverages dropped by 10 percent in Chilean households in the 18 months after Chile adopted "high in [sugar/sodium/saturated fat/calories]" nutrient warnings on food and drink packaging nationwide.[41]

To learn more about the science behind nutrient warnings, check out CSPI's Nutrient Warnings Factsheet at:
https://bit.ly/NutrientWarnings

Examples of Added Sugars & Sodium Menu Warnings



Item exceeds the total daily recommended limit for added sugars (50g) based on a 2,000-calorie diet. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines advises limiting added sugars.



Warning: ⚠ indicates that the sodium (salt) content of this item is higher than the total daily recommended limit (2,300 mg). High sodium intake can increase blood pressure and risk of heart disease and stroke.

Call To Action

Tell your Elected Officials to require Sodium & Added Sugars Warning Icons at Chain Restaurants in your Community Today

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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