

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D., Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest
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Press Conference on "Salt: the forgotten killer"
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Good morning, and welcome to this press conference. I am Michael Jacobson, the executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. For those of you are not familiar with CSPI, I would note that we have focused on issues of nutrition and food safety since 1971. We are supported largely by the 900,000 subscribers to our Nutrition Action Healthletter, probably the largest-circulation nutrition newsletter in the world. CSPI may be best-known for leading the effort to get nutrition labels on packaged foods and for its studies of the nutrient content of Chinese, Italian, and other restaurant foods, along with movie-theater popcorn. We have also publicized health risks from, and sought regulatory action on, a range of food ingredients, including sodium nitrite, sugar, and partially hydrogenated oils.

Today we're releasing a new report on what might be the single deadliest ingredient in our food supply: salt. That innocent-looking white powder is causing tens of thousands of premature deaths every year. Unfortunately, salt is also a *forgotten* killer. Consumers and nutritionists alike have focused on carbs, calories, and other matters, while salt has sunk below the radar screen. We're hoping to raise alarms so that consumers, health experts, industry officials, and policy makers remember why every single edition of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans going back to 1980 has urged Americans to consume less salt.

Also, today we are suing the Food and Drug Administration—asking the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia to insist that the FDA exercise its regulatory authority to lower sodium levels in processed foods. More about that in a few minutes.

Salt is by far the biggest source of sodium in the American diet and has long been known to increase blood pressure. The salt in our diets has turned our hearts and arteries into ticking time bombs—time bombs that explode in tens of thousands of Americans every year.

Before I say more, I would like to introduce Dr. Stephen Havas, who will summarize some of the evidence on salt and cardiovascular disease and explain the recommendations of federal health agencies. Dr. Havas is a professor of epidemiology, prevention, and medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine who has specialized in salt and hypertension. He also represents the American Public Health Association on the National Institutes of Health's committee on the prevention and control of high blood pressure.

EXCESSIVE SODIUM IN THE FOOD SUPPLY

The Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services, the American Heart Association, and the World Health Organization have all decried the high sodium content of the food supply and urged consumers to cut sodium levels in their diets. Unfortunately, literally thousands of foods contain one-fourth to one-half of a person's recommended daily limit of sodium, and many foods contain much more. To put these numbers in context, recall that the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that middle-aged and older adults, as well as African Americans and people with high blood pressure, limit themselves to 1,500 milligrams per day. Other people could consume a bit more: 2,300 milligrams per day. Just to cite a few foods,

- Two tablespoons of Ken's Caesar Lite dressing provides 600 milligrams of sodium.
- A package of Maruchan Instant Lunch Ramen Noodles with Vegetables provides 1,400 milligrams of sodium. If you eat only half a package, you're still getting a third to a half of a day's worth of sodium.
- And Swanson's Hungry Man XXL Roasted Carved Turkey dinner provides a whopping 5,410 milligrams, more than two days' worth of sodium

Judging by a trip to the store, companies could use less salt in many foods. For instance, Ken's Caesar Lite dressing contains 600 milligrams of sodium per serving...but Morgan's Caesar dressing contains only 170 milligrams, less than one-third as much. Healthy Choice Garden Vegetable soup contains about half as much sodium as Progresso's or Campbell's vegetable soups. Lay's potato chips contain twice as much sodium as Utz potato chips. In many other product categories, a careful label-reader could find substantial differences in sodium between brands.

The sodium situation at restaurants is even grimmer than at grocery stores. CSPI has analyzed hundreds of restaurant meals and found that while fat contents vary widely, sodium levels are almost universally high.

- At Italian restaurants, Spaghetti with Meatballs averages about 2,200 milligrams of sodium.
- An order of Beef with Broccoli or Shrimp with Garlic Sauce at a typical Chinese restaurant contains about 3,000 milligrams.
- A typical tuna, turkey, roast beef, or chicken salad sandwich has about 1,000 milligrams of sodium. A ham or corned beef sandwich has about 2,000. And a Reuben sandwich provides over 3,000 milligrams.
- Denny's Lumber Jack Slam Breakfast provides 4,460 milligrams.

Even if you split all those meals with a friend, you'd still be getting a half- to a whole-day's worth of sodium.

I'm sure that many food-industry officials will say that labeling gives consumers sufficient ability to choose a low-sodium diet. Realistically, though, considering the ubiquity of salt-laden foods, it's virtually impossible to consume such a diet. Nutrition labeling has helped millions of sodium-conscious people, but it will never solve the overall problem. It's time for the government to get food companies to use less salt in their foods—and also to mount serious campaigns to encourage consumers to choose overall healthy diets.

As for sodium, the bottom line is that Americans are consuming *more* sodium, not less, than we did 20 or 30 years ago. According to national dietary studies conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, consumption jumped from about 2,300 milligrams per person in the early 1970s to about 3,300 milligrams in 1999-2000. Even those numbers underestimate consumption, because people often underestimate what they eat and because the surveys don't include the salt used in home cooking or that is added at the table. Currently, the average American consumes about 4,000 milligrams per day.

That said, I'd like to highlight several companies that have made an effort. Most prominently, ConAgra's line of Healthy Choice foods all contain moderate amounts of sodium—generally much less than most of their competitors. Also, in the 1980s McDonald's, Quaker, and Campbell said they would use less salt. When we looked only at those companies' products that are still on sale, we found that the sodium content of 16 McDonald's products and 13 Campbell soups declined by an average of about 10 percent. Eight Quaker products contain about one-fourth less sodium than they did 20 years ago.

UPDATING THE REGULATORY STATUS OF SALT

In 1978, CSPI first petitioned the FDA to tackle the sodium issue. One of the things we asked the agency to do was to change the legal classification of salt—from being a “generally recognized as safe” ingredient to being a food additive. Such a change would make it easier for the FDA to limit salt to safe levels. Our case was buttressed in 1979 when an FDA advisory committee reported that there was no basis for considering salt to be safe and recommended restricting salt levels in processed foods.

The FDA rejected our petitions, but did require sodium labeling on certain foods. However, in 1983, CSPI sued the agency for continuing to consider salt to be generally recognized as safe. The FDA told the court that it wanted to see if labeling led to lower sodium levels and that if labeling failed the agency would consider taking stronger actions. The court accepted the FDA's strategy, but

said that FDA would still have to determine whether or not salt was generally recognized as safe.

CSPI then turned its attention to getting food labels to list not just sodium, but also calories, saturated fat, cholesterol, and other nutrients. That culminated in the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act. Before doing anything more on sodium, it seemed appropriate to see what effect the new Nutrition Facts labels would have on salt levels in foods and in the American diet.

- And that brings us to the present time. We're losing the sodium battle:
- * Sodium consumption has *increased*, not decreased.
 - * The number of new low-sodium foods introduced annually has dropped by half.
 - * According to industry surveys, consumer concern about sodium has declined steadily, and
 - * the U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not have a single employee focused on reducing salt consumption. *Not one person*—even though, as Dr. Havas and the former director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute have estimated, cutting in half the sodium levels in packaged and restaurant foods could save roughly 150,000 lives per year.

The key to lowering sodium consumption is not so much admonishing consumers as requiring manufacturers and restaurants to use less salt. The British government has been mounting a vigorous campaign to do just that, but the FDA is doing absolutely nothing. That's why today we've gone back to court to obtain an order that would require the FDA, after two decades of inaction, to decide whether it will continue to consider salt to be generally recognized as safe—even though every expert review has concluded that current levels of salt consumption are *unsafe*. Considering the huge numbers of lives that are at stake, we hope that the court will act quickly on our request.

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