

The Stealth Sodium Revolution

Salt has become one of a handful of sensitive nutrients in the public spotlight, according to major food company executives who attended the 2011 National Nutrient Databank Conference in Bethesda, Maryland. The conference is supported annually by the Agricultural Research Service's Nutrient Data Laboratory (NDL) and Food Surveys Research Group (FSRG) and other organizations. Both ARS groups are part of the Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland.

Salting is an ancient food-preservation practice still in use today to help preserve some foods. While salt-cured country hams and corned beef are still crowd pleasers, 80 percent of our dietary sodium comes from salt added to processed foods, according to experts.

At the conference, three major food companies described long-term "silent" or "stealth" sodium-reduction plans. One company reported already having removed 2 million pounds of salt from retail food brands in less than 10 years. Another announced plans to reduce sodium in prepared foods by 10 percent before 2015. Yet another reported plans to reformulate 600 products to reduce sodium while identifying healthy, functional alternative ingredients. All of the food companies talked about the need to "retrain the American palate" and to give consumers time to "adapt their taste buds" to less salt in their retail foods.

The effort could not come at a better time. The Institute of Medicine (IOM), part of the National Academies, has called on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to set mandatory national standards for the sodium content in foods. Congress asked IOM to recommend strategies for reducing sodium intake to levels recommended in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The IOM's 2010 report concluded that restaurants and food-processing manufacturers need to meet sodium standards, so that all sources in the food supply are involved. NDL and FSRG have been teaming up with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's new sodium surveillance efforts, which also involve FDA and the National Institutes of Health.

NDL researchers developed a plan to monitor the levels of sodium in foods—particularly the processed foods and ingredients that make up 80 percent of our population's added-sodium intake as assessed in USDA's 2007-2008 national "What We Eat in America" survey. Foods that rank highest in sodium are being validated by chemical analysis.

One NDL study showed that sodium in pizza has increased in the past 10 years, but sodium in pasta sauce and tomato soup decreased. The NDL also studied salt in baked products over a decade, including a variety of snack products (potato, tortilla, and corn chips; pretzels; and cheese puffs). "Mean sodium values declined in all snacks studied," says nutritionist Pamela Pehrsson, "with the biggest drop—40 percent—found in canned, stacked potato chips."

Having such accurate data on sodium in foods processed by manufacturers, restaurants, and foodservice firms supports efforts to monitor changes in sodium content of foods as well as future assessment of sodium intake in the U.S. population. The new data reported here has been included in the most recent release of the USDA-ARS National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference.—By **Rosalie Marion Bliss**, ARS.