

New Salt Law

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Two peanuts were walking on the bad side of town, and one was a salted.

While this joke is ancient and corny, it's still a classic. Additionally, the New York City Health Department agrees that a salted peanut can be dangerous. That's why last month the department released draft guidelines suggesting the maximum amount of salt that should be in a wide variety of manufactured and packaged foods.

Much like the State of California is viewed as the trendsetter when it comes to environmental regulation, the City of New York takes the lead in food oversight. Last year the Big Apple implemented rules banning trans fat in restaurant food and also requiring chain restaurants to post calorie information on their menus. Now the City that Never Sleeps will not rest until salty foods are brought under control.

According to City health commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley, "sodium is a major health problem" that needs to be addressed. That being said, the new rules about salt will be strictly voluntary, unlike the mandatory trans fat and calorie-posting rules. Likewise, there will be no penalties for companies that do not abide by the new rules, however, health officials still hope food manufactures will get on board.

The program is primarily modeled after a similar initiative that was launched in the United Kingdom in 2003. Other countries, including Canada, Australia, Finland, France, Ireland, and New Zealand, have also launched national initiatives to help reduce the salt in food. New York City has been joined by seventeen national health organizations and twenty-five other city or state health agencies in the effort to reduce salt in food, called the National Salt Reduction Initiative. The intention of the NSRI is to enlist more health organizations and agencies to help achieve its goal of reducing the average American's salt intake by twenty percent in five years.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, people need some salt in their diet. However, most experts claim that Americans now eat about twice as much as the daily recommendation, which can lead to health problems, including high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

The Initiative recommends drastic reductions in the sodium content of many different foods, from a twenty percent salt content decrease in peanut butter to a forty percent drop in canned vegetables. Not all foods are on the list, however, as there is no call for a reduction on salt bagels, a New York City staple.

The City's new standards require that by 2014, no restaurant hamburger should contain more than 1,200 milligrams of salt, half the daily recommended limit of 2,400 milligrams. Nearly every burger sold by McDonald's already meets that guideline, including my personal favorite, the Big Mac, which comes in at 1,040 milligrams of salt. Unfortunately, my dad's favorite sandwich, their double quarter pounder with cheese, has 1,380 milligrams. Comparatively, McDonald's French fries, which they claim to be America's Favorite, have 350 milligrams of salt.

The guidelines recommend that manufacturers decrease salt content gradually over several years so consumers won't notice the reduction. Experts believe that salt content can be reduced in processed food without sacrificing taste. In addition, the city's recommendations are intended to encourage companies to cut any unnecessary salt or alternatively give consumers more low-salt options.

Which reminds me – what did the salt say to the pepper? Season's greetings.