

POLICY FOCUS

FDA's Unhealthy Anti Salt Agenda

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently announced new “voluntary guidance” requiring food manufactures to cut sodium levels in more than 100 categories of food, such as bread, canned soups and vegetables, and deli meats.

The FDA claims these new regulations will improve Americans' health. Yet, critics have raised several concerns.

First, the latest medical research questions the relationship between salt and cardiovascular disease, and some studies even warn that certain groups need higher levels of salt in their diets. Second, food manufacturers are already producing low- and no-salt food items. This makes these new guidelines unnecessary since consumers can already choose low-sodium options. Third, these regulations will increase food costs for Americans already struggling financially.

Americans should also remember that the government has a dismal record on dietary matters. Consider that after decades of telling Americans to lower cholesterol levels, the 2016 dietary guidelines declared cholesterol “no longer a nutrient of concern.” Recall the USDA's disastrous food pyramid, which recommended a high-carbohydrate diet and made no distinction between healthy and unhealthy fats. The government's decades long guidance to avoid saturated fats directly led to the development of hydrogenated oils, which have now been banned by the same government that at one time applauded their creation.

Now the government nannies are at it again, putting all Americans on a low-salt diet—no matter the consequences.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Government efforts to limit our food choices can backfire on Americans. In particular, salt restrictions:

- **Are Not Scientifically Sound:** Medical researchers have warned that low-salt diets may actually be dangerous for certain people. Instead of a one-size-fits-all salt policy, the federal government should encourage individuals to find the sodium level that's best for their own health.
- **Will Lead to Higher Food Costs:** The Grocery Manufacturers Association estimates that lowering the salt content in processed food will cost manufacturers around \$500,000 per product, a cost that will be passed to the consumer.
- **Will Change the Taste and Texture of Consumer Favorites:** Forcing manufacturers to use less salt will alter the food's taste and texture, which for some companies will result in plummeting sales. Consumers may also opt for less healthy, higher-calorie alternatives.
- **Are Unnecessary:** Food manufacturers already produce low- and no-salt food items. Requiring all food to be low-salt is an unnecessary regulatory burden for businesses.
- **Eat Away Our Freedoms:** Individuals, not government bureaucrats, should decide how much salt to consume. Government has no business trying to influence Americans' food decisions.

MORE INFORMATION

Congressional authorization for the Food and Drug Administration states the agency is “responsible for protecting the public health by assuring the safety, efficacy and security of human and veterinary drugs, biological products, medical devices, our nation’s food supply, cosmetics, and products that emit radiation.” Yet, the Obama administration has expanded that mandate; granting vast powers to the FDA, which is now demanding manufacturers change their products to meet abstruse federal health guidelines.

While there are many examples of FDA overreach (mandated calorie listings on menus, restrictions on spas and salons, transfats bans), perhaps there's no better example than the FDA's crackdown on how Americans choose to season their food.

In 2011, the FDA announced that it planned to look into “approaches to reducing sodium consumption” in an effort to get *all* Americans to lower salt intake to 2,300 milligrams (from an average of 3,500). Those “approaches” were finally codified in 2016 when the FDA announced draft guidance entitled **Voluntary Sodium Reduction Goals: Target Mean and Upper Bound Concentrations for Sodium in Commercially Processed, Packaged, and Prepared Foods**. Explaining the reason for the new guidelines, the FDA's statement read:

The draft guidance, when finalized, will describe our views on voluntary short-term

and long-term goals for sodium reduction in a variety of identified categories of foods that are commercially processed, packaged, or prepared. These goals are intended to address the excessive intake of sodium in the current population and promote improvements in public health.

Some will argue that because these guidelines are voluntary, manufacturers can simply ignore them. Yet, when a powerful federal agency issues “voluntary guidelines,” businesses—big and small--know that to survive, they must comply.

The public should object to this latest initiative by the FDA, which ignores the latest scientific research on salt’s health impacts and disregards how the market is already responding to consumers’ preferences.

The Science Is Not Settled on Salt

In the rush to reduce Americans’ sodium consumption, many in the medical community worry that the government is ignoring the latest research on salt and that reducing salt consumption might actually result in negative health outcomes for individuals who don’t suffer from hypertension or face a high risk of stroke and other diseases.

Andrew Mente, an associate professor of clinical epidemiology and biostatistics at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, is a vocal opponent of pushing Americans to reduce their salt intake below 2,300 milligrams a day (the FDA’s goal). In a study published in *The Lancet*, Mente warned that such a low level as

the government recommends might actually increase the risk of heart disease compared with average salt consumption.

Mente isn’t alone. Researcher Rod Taylor and a team of British scientists recently published a study that concluded cutting salt consumption did not translate into lower death or heart disease risk. The **210-page report** concluded: “... evidence from studies on direct health outcomes is inconsistent and insufficient to conclude that lowering sodium intakes below 2,300 milligrams per day either increases or decreases risk of CVD [cardiovascular disease] outcomes (including stroke and CVD mortality) or all-cause mortality in the general U.S. population.”

In an interview about the report, Taylor was critical of government sodium reduction policies, warning, “With governments setting ever lower targets for salt intake and food manufacturers working to remove it from their products, it’s really important that we do some large research trials to get a full understanding of the benefits and risks of reducing salt intake.”

These are not new concerns. As far back as 2006, the *American Journal of Medicine* published a study of 78 million Americans, concluding that the “evidence linking sodium intake to mortality outcomes is scant and inconsistent.” In 2007, a study published in the *European Journal of Epidemiology* found that “salt intake was not consistently related to CVD or mortality” but that an “increased risk of mortality was observed for high salt intake in overweight subjects.” In 2011, Swedish researchers published a study in the *Journal Nature*, which found factors other than

salt had an impact on a subject's blood pressure (in this case, genetic factors).

Another study published in the American Journal of Hypertension by two Danish researchers analyzed 167 other studies on salt and **warned that** “the ‘science’ on which the FDA policy on sodium reduction is based is dubious” and that “the present recommendations may kill people instead of saving them.”

Even the Institute of Medicine stated in 2013 that the evidence on direct health outcomes does not support recommendations to lower sodium intake.

In spite of this, the FDA has proceeded with a set of strict guidelines to limit salt in food products. This is in direct conflict with the agency's own mission statement **posted on its website**, which reads it is “responsible for advancing the public health by... helping the public get the accurate, science-based information they need to use medicines and foods to maintain and improve their health.”

Already High Food Costs Will Increase

Americans are paying more and more for food these days. And now with increasing government activity to tax or regulate food products and certain behaviors (Philadelphia just passed a massive tax on soda), consumers can expect yet more price increases.

In fact, according to estimates by the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the cost of lowering the salt content in processed food

items will land somewhere between **\$500,000 and \$700,000 per product**. Per product!

Companies simply cannot absorb the billion of dollars required to reformulate their products. Ergo, consumers will begin to pay more for food products that will taste blander and will be texturally different than before. Manufacturers may also compensate for reduction in salt by adding other ingredients that help make food taste better – like fat and sugar. That's hardly a victory for public health.

In addition, lowering the salt content of certain foods is likely to create a food safety hazard. According to **researchers in France**, efforts to reduce salt in meat products, such as sausage, could increase the incidence of spoilage and food waste. The **report** makes the commonsense observation that “raw sausages are perishable foodstuffs.” By ignoring the fact that salt is also used as a preservative, the FDA is recklessly putting in place regulations that could lead to increased food safety risks.

The Market Already Works

Americans want to eat healthy and many individuals want to cut their salt consumption. Food manufacturers are working hard to meet this growing demand. According to data from the Grocery Manufacturers Association, since 2002, food companies have introduced more than **6,500 reduced sodium food products** into the marketplace.

Grocery stores now stock a wide range of choices. From soup and canned vegetables to

bread and condiments, consumers are able to make choices that suit their individual health needs. Even fresh deli meats—well known to be especially high in salt—now come in low- and no-salt versions. For instance, the widely available **Boar's Head** brand of luncheon meat has developed a low-salt line that only contains a miniscule 80 milligrams of sodium per two-ounce serving (which is also low-calorie and low-fat).

Restaurants are joining the health trends. **New York Times reporter Josh Barro recently wrote** about the rise of healthier fast food options, highlighting restaurant chains like Chop't, Lyfe Kitchen, Maoz Vegetarian, Modmarket and Native Foods Café, which offer affordable meals that are lower in calories, high in vitamins and other nutrients, and can accommodate a variety of dietary requests. The popularity of these restaurants has nothing to do with government mandates. Rather, their success stems from Americans demanding healthier choices.

This trend will continue to grow, and it will pressure traditional fast food restaurants to offer new and fresher-looking items on their menus. That's the beauty of the free market. Consumers have incredible power, and businesses interested in staying afloat and making a profit are wise to keep track of consumer demands.

Conclusion

Politicians like to tell people how to live and eat and behave, but Americans should be trusted to live their lives the way they see fit.

The FDA's paternalistic salt regulations are not only unnecessary; they are dangerous. The FDA should back off this policy and allow the market to work.

Case Study: Campbell's Soup

In 2009, facing pressure from public health officials and vocal food nannies, Campbell's Soup announced that it planned to reduce the sodium level in all of its soups by 32 percent. This led to a massive sales slump, and by 2012, the company was forced to return to their old recipes in order to win back customers.

Food activists were quick to criticize the company. NYU professor and food blogger Marion Nestle lamented the soup giant's decision, saying, "As I endlessly repeat, even companies that want to make 'healthier' products cannot do it — unless the products sell. If they don't, forget it." She's right. Companies must sell products to stay in business and make money. What Nestle and many other food activists didn't mention at the time was that Campbell's maintained its low-salt line, which means consumers still had available choices that met their specific dietary needs.

The Campbell's Soup example offers a glimpse into what consumers can expect: products that simply don't taste the way they used to and for some companies, plummeting sales.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Get Informed:** Learn more about food and nutrition issues. Visit:
 - The Independent Women's Forum
 - The Heritage Foundation
 - The Competitive Enterprise Institute
- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.
- **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group together each month to talk about a

political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

- **Remain Engaged Politically:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website www.iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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