

NYC asks food manufacturers to cut salt content

January 11 2010, By DAVID B. CARUSO , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- City health officials have battled trans fat and high-calorie fast food. Now, they're taking on salt.

The health department planned to release on Monday draft guidelines suggesting the maximum amount of salt that should be in a wide variety of manufactured and packaged foods.

The recommendations call for sizable reductions in the [sodium content](#) of many products, from a 20 percent drop in peanut butter to a 40 percent decline in canned vegetables.

Unlike the city's recent ban on trans fat in restaurant food or rules implemented last year requiring chain restaurants to post calorie information on their menus, this initiative is purely voluntary.

But even though there will be no penalties for companies that ignore the guidelines, health officials say they think some manufacturers may be motivated to make changes.

"They all fully recognize that sodium is a major health problem that they need to address," said the city's health commissioner, Dr. Thomas Farley.

Seventeen national health organizations and 25 other city or state health agencies have joined with New York City in the effort, called the National Salt Reduction Initiative. It aims to reduce the average

Americans' [salt intake](#) by 20 percent in five years.

Everyone needs some salt in his or her diet, but experts say Americans now eat about twice as much as they should. That can lead to problems including [high blood pressure](#) and an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

The guidelines suggest that manufacturers lower salt content gradually over several years so consumers won't notice, and they aren't asking for big changes in every category.

For example, under the city's standards, by 2014 no [restaurant](#) hamburger should contain more than 1,200 milligrams of salt. Nearly every burger sold by McDonald's already meets that guideline, although there are exceptions like the double quarter pounder with cheese, which has 1,380 milligrams of salt.

The city isn't suggesting that all products be less salty - there's no call for a ban on New York's beloved salt bagels.

Instead, Farley said, the city's recommendations are intended to encourage companies to cut salt where it isn't needed or just give consumers more low-salt options. He said he's sure some processed-food manufacturers can cut salt content without making their products less tasty.

"We think people won't notice," he said.

ConAgra Foods Inc., which makes products including Chef Boyardee canned pasta meals, Healthy Choice frozen dinners and Swiss Miss hot chocolate, has pledged to reduce the salt in its consumer food products by 20 percent by 2015, in part because of consumer demand. It said its initiative would eliminate about 10 million pounds of salt per year from

the American diet.

Still, processed-food companies have historically been extremely reluctant to tinker with recipes, especially when dealing with a key ingredient like salt, where even minor adjustments can affect taste. Salt also helps to preserve food and make bread rise.

Health officials acknowledged that the program faces hurdles.

"It isn't simple for them to just change the amount of sodium in their products," said Farley.

And some of the changes the city is asking for are substantial. The target goals call for a 40 percent reduction in the amount of salt in breakfast cereals, a 25 percent reduction for breads and cold cuts and a 30 percent cut for salad dressing.

But, Farley said, simply asking the public to be more careful about what they eat hasn't worked, in part because consumers have too few low-sodium choices.

"Eighty percent of the [salt](#) we eat is in the food already when you buy it," he said. "Even if you are reading the back of a package, there is often no choice there."

New York City's program is modeled in part after a similar initiative in the United Kingdom that has been under way since 2003.

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