

Too much salt: Report urges FDA to force rollback

April 20 2010, By LAURAN NEERGAARD , AP Medical Writer



The Morton Salt distribution facility is seen in Chicago, Tuesday, April 20, 2010. Too much salt is hidden in Americans' food, and regulators plan to work with manufacturers to cut back, but the government isn't ready to go along with a major new recommendation that it order a decrease. (AP Photo/Paul Beaty)

(AP) -- Too much salt is hidden in Americans' food, and regulators plan to work with manufacturers to cut back - but the government isn't ready to go along with a major new recommendation that it order a decrease.

"We believe we can achieve some substantial voluntary reductions,"

Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Dr. Margaret Hamburg told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "We are shaping a strategy, and that strategy involves working in partnership."

Don't expect soups, pizzas and breakfast cereals - yes, they contain added sodium, too - to taste different any time soon. The FDA's plans are still being formulated, but the idea is for gradual change so consumer taste buds can adjust, as well as industry recipes and production methods.

Americans eat about 1 1/2 teaspoons of salt daily, more than double what they need for good health and enough to increase the risk of high blood pressure, strokes and other problems. Most of that sodium doesn't come from the table salt shaker; it's hidden inside common processed foods and restaurant meals.

On Tuesday, the prestigious Institute of Medicine said the food industry has made little progress in voluntarily reducing sodium. The advisers urged the FDA to set maximum sodium levels for different foods in a stepwise rollback, so that eventually average consumption would drop by about half a teaspoon.

"This needs to be a mandatory standard," said Dr. Jane E. Henney of the University of Cincinnati, a former FDA commissioner who headed the IOM's study. Because salt is so "ubiquitous, having one or two in the industry make strong attempts at this doesn't give us that even playing field over time. It's not sustainable."

The IOM report doesn't set a deadline, but says it will take years to phase in the changes for consumers who are used to the taste of a high-salt diet.

One in three U.S. adults has high blood pressure, which in turn is a

leading cause of heart attacks, strokes and kidney failure. And while being overweight and inactive raises blood pressure, too much salt is a big culprit as well. The American Medical Association has said 150,000 lives a year could be saved by cutting in half sodium levels in processed and restaurant food.

"This is crying out for a change that's long overdue," added Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who helped spur the IOM report and plans hearings on next steps.

Hamburg told the AP that while her agency is reviewing the recommendations, it isn't currently writing new regulations - and that setting legal limits on how much sodium can be added to different foods would take longer than collaborating with food makers on salt-cutting goals.

"We would be working with them to establish targets," she said. "We absolutely see reducing salt in the diets of Americans as a very important public health priority. ... You'll see us sitting down with key industry partners and starting to define a roadmap."

Government guidelines set 2,300 milligrams of sodium as the maximum daily intake - the amount above which health problems can appear. The IOM says people need just 1,500 mg a day for good health, less if they're over 50. Yet average consumption is more than 3,400 mg.

The food industry has long argued that it didn't have tasty ways to replace sodium if it made deep cuts. But brand-to-brand differences in the same foods suggest that's not so, and some food giants are leading the way in sodium reduction.

ConAgra Foods Inc. - makers of products including Chef Boyardee canned pasta, Healthy Choice frozen dinners and Hunt's tomato sauces -

last fall pledged a 20 percent reduction in its food lines by 2015. The Omaha, Neb.-based company says its cuts would eliminate a stunning 10 million pounds of salt from the U.S. diet.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association said Tuesday that its companies look forward to working with FDA "to develop a national sodium reduction strategy that will help consumers."

New York City just began a closely watched program to reduce salt levels in restaurant and store-bought foods, with the goal of cutting salt levels by a quarter over five years. The health department's guidelines are voluntary, setting targets for different kinds of foods.

Leaving it to consumers to know how much sodium they eat and cut back on their own doesn't work, the IOM report said.

"Phasing in a population-wide decrease in salt intake is probably the most practical way to go," agreed Tufts University nutrition scientist Alice Lichtenstein, an American Heart Association spokeswoman. "If they become mandatory, then I think we will see change."

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