



Sodium Solutions

BY MELISSA KVIDAHL

It seems that every few years, the public takes on a new enemy in its quest for healthy eating. This enemy has taken the form of refined sugars, carbohydrates and fat content. Today, however, trends suggest that more consumers than ever are concerned about sodium content—and rightfully so.

“Too much sodium in foods can exacerbate hypertension in people who are prone to the condition, and also cause bloating and water retention,” explained Jackie Keller, founder of NutriFit (Bonners Ferry, ID), maker of six proprietary, salt-free spice blends. “High sodium foods are also an issue for those suffering from various heart-related ailments, such as congestive heart failure. And as our consumption of processed

and pre-prepared foods increases, so does our overall sodium intake, as salt is frequently used in place of seasoning for flavoring and preservative properties.”

According to the Mayo Clinic, this spike in prepared foods’ availability is partially to blame for modern shoppers’ high sodium troubles: as little as five percent of sodium in the average American diet is added while cooking, six percent is added while eating and 12 percent is attained from natural sources; but a whopping 77 percent of an average American’s sodium intake comes from purchased and prepared foods. This means that while Americans may be cutting back at the saltshaker at the stove or dinner table, the foods themselves are high in sodium, rendering

their salt-cutting techniques useless. These high-sodium foods are partly to blame for the fact that Americans typically consume about 4,000mg of sodium daily—almost twice the US Department of Agriculture’s recommendation of 2,300mg daily, said Carlos Rodriguez, salt marketing manager at Cargill (Minneapolis, MN).

“A number of cities, states and national health organizations have come together to propose that salt levels in packaged and restaurant foods be reduced by 25 percent over the next five years,” he continued. “Leaders of the National Salt Reduction Initiative say this voluntary move would reduce the nation’s salt intake by 20 percent and prevent thousands of premature deaths. This group is just one of many who seem to shout daily that salt is bad for you.”



Sodium Awareness by the Numbers

According to Natural Marketing Institute's (NMI, Harleysville, PA) most recent annual Health and Wellness Trends Survey, sodium content is indeed on consumers' radars.

Some statistics to consider:

- 27 percent of the population indicated that their use of low-sodium foods and beverages has increased over the past year
- Nearly half (46 percent) indicated that sodium content is one of the specific items they check most often when reading product labels
- Users of dietary supplements are far more likely to look for sodium on the package label than non-supplement users (48 percent versus 34 percent)
- When asked which nutrients consumers would like to get less of or eliminate from their diet, two in five (41 percent) listed sodium

"Clearly consumers are interested and reported that they are taking action toward decreasing the amount of sodium in their diet," said Greg Stephens, vice president of strategic consulting at NMI. "Plus, more consumers are reading labels than ever before and sodium content is one of the top nutrients they are looking for."

products is growing as more companies make pledges to reduce sodium in their products," explained Rodriguez. "And, as the government and health-related organizations recommend changes, it appears the industry will continue to grow."

Challenges and Resolutions

This category is not without its share of challenges, though, the first of which beginning with the consumer.

"Awareness about the dangers of having too much sodium in foods is growing, but palates adjust slowly, and the preference for salt is learned," explained Keller. "Unless people are willing to give themselves time to adjust to the lower sodium foods, and to begin to enjoy other flavors, it will take time."

Another set of challenges happens at the manufacturing stage. According to

Rodriguez, there does not exist an easy solution when it comes to lowering sodium in a food or beverage. "One misconception is that there is one silver-bullet solution that will work across all food applications," he said. "The fact is that sodium reduction is not an easy solution. Food companies need to take a step back and determine their end goals, then take a look at all of the sources of sodium in the product (it can come from flavoring agents or texturizing agents) and figure out what can be cut out while still maintaining the product's needs." Only then, he said, can a manufacturer determine the best reduced sodium option.

NutriFit, for example, provides different salt-free spice blends that will train the palate to appreciate tastes that don't rely on salt. "Our NutriFit spice blends eliminate or minimize the need for added salt by adding pure seasoning to foods," Keller said. "This helps reduce the total amount of sodium in the average diet."

From Bon Vivant International, LLC (Edgewater, NJ) is its NutraSalt, a natural sea salt with 66 percent less sodium than other salts. One perk is that it can replace salt in a one-to-one ratio in cooking and baking.

Cargill offers three different sodium alternatives. SaltWise®, a sodium reduction system, allows manufacturers to reduce the sodium in their products by 25 to 50 percent, while still delivering a salty taste. Premier™ potassium chloride is a food grade potassium chloride that can replace sodium chloride in formulations (though not in a one-to-one ratio, so some reformulating might be necessary), since it mimics salt in ways such as texture and protein binding, water retention capacity and fermentation control. Finally, Alberger® brand salt crystals result in a "flavor burst" when they touch the tongue and rapidly dissolve, allowing manufacturers to reduce the amount used.

"But when it comes down to making purchasing decisions, taste still rules," said Rodriguez. "People simply love the great taste of salt and we have ingredients that can provide that." **NIE**

FORMOREINFORMATION:

- Bon Vivant International, LLC, (201) 496-6241
- Cargill, (888) 385-SALT
- Natural Marketing Institute, (215) 513-7300
- NutriFit, (866) 438-3328

Company Promises

While these groups may be shouting, consumers seem to register only a whisper as concern is present, but not alarmingly so.

In the mainstream, for instance, Rodriguez pointed out that one common food application increasingly marketed as low sodium and which has seen a number of new product launches over the last several years is soup. "Other applications that have seen more new product introductions making lower sodium claims as part of a larger health claim include breakfast cereals," he added.

And like most trends, this one is experiencing success from the top down—as companies begin to lower sodium first, consumers subsequently learn more about the dangers of the ingredient when they see reduced sodium products on the shelf. Rodriguez noted that in the last few years alone, the number of new products launched in the US with reduced sodium claims doubled from 286 products in 2007 to 584 products in 2009.

"The category of sodium reduction