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## Some food products giving the boot to excess salt

By Bruce Horowitz, USA TODAY

Even as artery-clogging trans fats continue their fast fade from the nation's food supply, there are early signs that 2009's nutrition "bad guy" will be salt.

Salt is being siphoned from soups, banished from breads, channeled out of chips, even bumped from baby foods.

Big foodmakers, from Campbell ([CPB](#)) to ConAgra ([CAG](#)), have companywide plans to cut salt. Lower sodium is "our top strategic priority," says CEO Douglas Conant of Campbell, which has cut sodium in everything from soups to Prego sauces to V8 juices.

Some 663 products claiming "reduced sodium" were introduced in 2007, vs. 449 in 2006. Through the first nine months of this year, 402 were introduced, says Tom Vierhile, director of Datamonitor's Productscan Online, which tracks new products.

"A little less salt makes consumers think they're doing the right thing," Vierhile says.

But that's not all that's driving salt reduction. Aging Boomers are in search of low-salt foods. Parents are demanding less salt in kids' diets. And one food activist group is calling for the government to order salt reduction in foods by up to 50%.

"High sodium content is the single greatest problem in the American diet," says Michael Jacobson, executive director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "It's welcome that some companies are lowering sodium, but what's really needed is a government initiative."

Some 150,000 lives could be saved annually if Americans cut sodium intake in half, according to a National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute study. The average daily sodium intake now is 4,000 milligrams — roughly twice the government's recommended amount for most people.

For three years, the Center for Science has been pushing the Food and Drug Administration to set limits on salts in food. In September, Dr. Thomas Frieden, New York City's activist health chief, indicated that after getting trans fats and calories reduced in many foods sold citywide, salt may be next on his hit list.

It's no surprise foodmakers are serious about squeezing sodium. But unlike sugar, which has many substitutes, cutting sodium is not simple. "It's a traditional ingredient with no easy replacement," Jacobson notes.

The lid has been put on sodium in many products, however:

- Breads.** Pepperidge Farm, Campbell's bakery unit, this month is rolling out lower-sodium versions of the eight breads in its 100% Natural line. Most will be down 33% to 40%, says Tim Hassett, senior vice

president at Pepperidge Farm.

The company replaced regular salt with sea salt, which delivers more salt flavor, he says. A typical slice will have 120 milligrams of sodium, down from 180. Ads will claim: "We've reduced the sodium, not the taste." The move is expected to boost its bread sales by at least 10% in the next year, Hassett says. Next up for salt reduction: Pepperidge Farm bagels and rolls.

•**Soups.** Campbell's reduced-sodium soups will ring up \$650 million in retail sales this year, vs. \$100 million in 2003, says Lisa Walker, vice president of innovation, and its lower-sodium soup line was deemed the top-selling new food product introduction of 2007 by Information Resources. Perhaps that's why, in February, Campbell announced sodium reduction in 48 of its soups. Overall, 85 of its 230 varieties now are lower in sodium.

But its three best-selling classic soups (Chicken Noodle, Tomato and Cream of Mushroom) remain veritable salt mines. A can of classic Chicken Noodle contains 890 milligrams of sodium.

"The reality is, some people care (about sodium), and some don't," Walker says. That said, the mission is to cut sodium in all products, she says.

•**Chips.** In April, Frito-Lay ([PEP](#)) launched Pinch of Salt, a low-sodium line with a 30% to 50% salt reduction in its Lay's, Tostitos, Ruffles and Fritos chips. Less sodium is "the No. 1 request from our consumers," says Jaya Kumar, chief marketing officer.

•**Popcorn.** Orville Redenbacher has rolled out SmartPop Lower Sodium Popcorn with 30% less than regular Redenbacher popcorn. The rest of the Redenbacher line will have sodium cut 15% to 30%, says Stan Jacot, general manager of popcorn brands.

•**Baby food.** Beech-Nut recently introduced Let's Grow toddler meals with a "no junk" promise. They have 200 or fewer milligrams of sodium per serving, up to 50% less than some brands.

•**Salt.** There's even less salt in some salt. Last year, Morton Salt rolled out Salt Balance, a blend of salt (sodium chloride) and potassium chloride with 25% less sodium than regular salt.