

# New York Times

## Throwing the Book at Salt

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DR. [THOMAS R. FRIEDEN](#) invited some of the biggest names in food processing to lunch last October. Grilled salmon and green salad were on the menu, but the subject was salt.

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Ron Barrett

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Photo Illustration by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

After a string of victories over [smoking](#), [trans fats](#) and [calories](#), Dr. Frieden, the commissioner of New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, is waging a new campaign: to lower the amount of sodium America eats.

But don't go hiding your saltshakers. The city isn't going after the seasoning people add at the table or in the kitchen. That makes up only about 11 percent of the salt people eat, Dr. Frieden says.

His targets are packaged foods and mass-produced restaurant meals, which contribute 80 percent of the sodium in the average American [diet](#).

When the food company executives had finished lunch, Dr. Frieden made his pitch: Over the next five years, identify the foods that are contributing the most sodium to people's diets and cut the level of salt by 25 percent. In a decade, cut it by another 25 percent. And do it in unison with your competitors.

If they refuse?

"If there's not progress in a few years, we'll have to consider other options, like legislation," he said in an interview last week.

The last two times Dr. Frieden stepped into the nutrition wars, he gave muscle to nationwide moves to ban trans fats and post calorie counts on restaurant menus. That means you could soon be hearing more about salt than you have in a long time.

“The one thing that’s disturbing is that he seems to be able to do just about anything he wants in New York City, and New York City serves as a model for the rest of the world,” said E. Charles Hunt of the New York Restaurant Association and a veteran of legal wars over Dr. Frieden’s food policies.

This war, however, is likely to be more difficult for Dr. Frieden, both practically and politically, than were his efforts to get restaurant chains to post calorie counts on menus and stop cooking with trans fat.

First, salt is harder to scrub from the food supply, and its connection to cardiovascular disease is less understood. Besides, the food industry says it’s already dealing with sodium levels. And then there is the scope of Dr. Frieden’s plan. He wants to get most of the major food and restaurant companies to do the same thing at the same time.

Lowering salt consumption, along with stopping smoking, are two areas in which a broad public health effort can have the most impact on the most people, Dr. Frieden said.

Key to the plan is a gradual reduction in sodium levels. The theory is that if the salt disappears slowly enough, consumers will not notice.

Dr. Sonia Angell, director of cardiovascular health for the city, said: “We’ve created a whole society of people accustomed to food that is really, really salty. We have to undo that.”

Because other nutritional culprits have gotten more attention lately, salt and the case against it has faded into the background. Most of the nation’s heart researchers agree that [high blood pressure](#) is a leading factor in the incidence of [heart attack](#) and stroke. And in some people, but not everyone, salt causes high

blood pressure. While drugs can treat hypertension, not everybody has access to medication. And although doctors have been telling people to watch their salt for years, it hasn't been working.

That's why Dr. Frieden says a quiet, mass reduction in sodium levels — stealth health, they like to call it around the department — might be more effective. Lower sodium levels by 50 percent, and 150,000 American lives a year might be saved, he said.

Under his plan, which is based on one in the United Kingdom, targets for sodium reduction will be set for certain food categories. The prime suspects include cheese, breakfast cereals, bread, macaroni and noodle products, cake mixes, condiments and soups. The final list of sodium targets will be based on a formula that takes into account the amount of sodium in a product as well as how much food in that category people eat.

The idea isn't to force small bakers or high-end chefs to salt less liberally. Health officials believe it's the big companies that can have the biggest effect on sodium.

“If they bring it down by 5 percent, that is going to do more than [Danny Meyer](#) bringing it down by 50 percent,” said Geoffrey Cowley, an associate commissioner of the Health Department, referring to the New York restaurateur.

Although he has jurisdiction over only New York City, Dr. Frieden is presenting the plan as a “national salt-reduction initiative” that includes support from a half-dozen other health departments around the country and organizations like the [American Medical Association](#).

To take his idea beyond the city, Dr. Frieden convened his series of salt talks. The first was in late October, when he asked companies like Unilever, PepsiCo and Goya to Gracie Mansion. In February, he and a team from the Health Department will meet with the leaders of chain restaurants.

People in the Health Department thought the lunch was such a success they celebrated over drinks later that day. Some industry leaders had a different perspective.

“I would say the invitations to come to Gracie Mansion weren’t very inviting,” said an executive with a food manufacturer who was not authorized to speak for the company about the New York Health Department. “There was definitely a feeling of ‘Don’t make us shame you.’ ”

Robert Earl, vice president for science policy, nutrition and health of the Grocery Manufacturers Association, said his members would prefer a national sodium strategy that included a wider range of players, including consumer and advocacy groups.

There are other problems, he said. Getting many companies to do something at the same time might have antitrust implications. And more research is needed to understand what consumers want and the complex health implications of sodium reduction.

“We need to look at these things more holistically and over the long term,” said Mr. Earl, whose association issued its own policy paper on sodium Jan. 12.

The federal government has been trying to wrangle sodium levels for decades. In the 1980s, the federal dietary guidelines included an admonishment against excess sodium, and shortly thereafter the [Food](#)

[and Drug Administration](#) called on the food industry to reduce sodium levels in processed foods voluntarily.

It didn't work. By the year 2000, according to the most recent data from a large national study, men were consuming 48 percent more salt than they did in the early 1970s, and women, 69 percent more.

That's in part because food got saltier, but also because people were consuming more calories.

Michael Jacobson, executive director of the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#) and a longtime adversary of the producers of high-sodium food, became so frustrated that in 2005 he issued a report entitled "Salt: The Forgotten Killer."

The federal [Institute of Medicine](#) is expected to issue a comprehensive study on sodium intake later this year that could affect the national dietary guidelines.

Currently, the guidelines suggest people eat no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day (although on food labels the upper limit of sodium for a 2,000 calorie diet is 2,400 milligrams). That's about a teaspoon of salt, and half of what many people actually eat. Those more prone to high blood pressure, like African-Americans and older people, are advised to eat much less.

The food industry, too, has taken up sodium reduction with new energy. The grocery manufacturers' group and the National Restaurant Association each held sodium conferences recently. At both gatherings, how to find a good salt substitute was a central topic.

“It’s frankly been one of those holy grails in the food industry for a number of years,” said Todd Abraham, a senior vice president for Kraft foods.

Kraft alone has spent \$20 million on sodium reduction research, studying chemicals that block taste receptors and experimenting with yeast or potassium as substitutes.

It’s relatively easy to reduce salt that is applied topically, like that on potato chips. But those chips, while they may taste saltier, usually contain less sodium than items like muffins. That’s because salt’s role in processing packaged foods goes beyond flavor. It helps create structure in breads and encourages browning in baked goods. Salt helps emulsify the ingredients in bologna and American cheese, and keeps pathogens at bay.

Still, sodium levels can vary greatly within one category of products. Sam’s Choice Thick and Chunky salsa, for example, has about double the sodium of Muir Glen organic salsa.

Beyond the technical hurdles, Dr. Frieden might encounter resistance on scientific grounds. Some medical researchers question whether a mass reduction in sodium is the best way to spend public-health resources when losing weight and quitting [cigarettes](#) would do more for the country’s heart health.

[Genetics](#) dictate that different people have different reactions to sodium. Some people are more sensitive to high levels of salt. For others, low levels of sodium can be unhealthy.

But public health officials say there is a strong consensus that salt leads to higher rates of heart attacks and strokes.

That consensus alarms Dr. Michael Alderman, editor in chief of the American Journal of Hypertension, who thinks more clinical studies need to be done. And, he says, wild swings in dietary regulation haven't always worked out.

Even trans fat, in the form of margarine, was once promoted by health officials as healthier than butter. It turns out that trans fats were worse for heart health than saturated fats.

"Diet is an incredibly complicated business," Dr. Alderman said.