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MEMO FROM MFJ

# Don't Forget About Salt



One year ago, at a well-attended news conference in Ottawa, the 25-member Sodium Working Group published its road map for chopping the average Canadian's daily sodium intake by about one-third by 2016. The ultimate

goal: gradually trim the current average daily intake of 3,400 milligrams to the recommended 1,500 mg. That would save an estimated 16,000 lives each year.

During its nearly three years of deliberations, the group of academic experts, health advocates (including our National Coordinator, Bill Jeffery), government officials, and food industry lobbyists learned that it's not so much *Canadians* as it is the *Canadian food industry* that has a love affair with the salt shaker.

The commercial food supply has become way too salty. And plenty of less-salty safe harbours in grocery stores and restaurants are too hard to spot because the Nutrition Facts are tucked away on the backs of packages or on restaurant Web sites.

What's more, food labels use inflated benchmarks (the 2,400 mg Daily Value for sodium instead of the 1,500 mg Adequate Intake), and some companies shrink serving sizes to make sodium look lower. So few people know, for example, that sodium varies from:

- 260 mg in three slices (66 grams) of PC Blue Menu Oven Roasted Turkey Breast to 570 mg in four slices (64 grams) of Maple Leaf Natural Selections Oven-Roasted Turkey Breast.

- 490 mg in ¼ white-meat Rotisserie Chicken at Swiss Chalet to 1,560 mg for the same dish at East Side Mario's.

- 920 mg in Extreme Pita's regular Freestyle Grilled Chicken Pita to 1,980 mg in the chain's regular Chef Inspired Buffalo Chicken Pita.

The Working Group—whose members were appointed by the Minister of Health—unanimously agreed that, to ratchet down Canadians' blood pressure, government needs to put the squeeze on salt-happy food manufacturers and restaurants by setting sodium limits for breads, soups, frozen entrees, and other foods.

Governments also need to require calories and sodium on menus and improve packaged-food labels to help people choose less-salty options, the panel concluded, and to set sodium standards for schools, hospitals, and other public institutions. And the Feds should allow foods like pickles and cheese to use low-sodium salt substitutes instead of salt.

Prime Minister Harper proclaimed his support for the sodium-reduction goals in a New Year's Eve boast of his government's 2010 accomplishments. Problem is, Minister of Health Leona Aglukkaq deep-sixed the Sodium Working

Group the same month.

Prime Minister Harper and Minister Aglukkaq, when will you empower your officials to fully implement the Sodium Reduction Strategy for Canada? The heart attacks and strokes caused by excess sodium not only result in immeasurable suffering. Ultimately, they lead to billions of dollars in unnecessary health-care costs and lost productivity.

The federal government is under enormous pressure to slay deficits and shrink debts. We can ill afford sodium-induced burdens on the economy at the best of times, let alone when efficiency and frugality are crucial.

In Ottawa's zeal to trim the fat, it shouldn't ignore the salt. The price of stalling another year is too dear.

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Centre for Science in the Public Interest



How much salt is in that restaurant meal? The government needs to make it easier for you to find out.

The contents of NAH are not intended to provide medical advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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