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Should the Food Industry Ban Added Salt and Sugar?

A commentary on public health officials' calls to limit salt and sugar in food

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The pressure is on the food industry to stop poisoning us with all that added salt and sugar that make Oreos, Coke, and Krispy Kreme doughnuts taste oh, so good. On Tuesday, the Institute of Medicine urged the Food and Drug Administration to start regulating the amount of sodium in foods, since simply telling us to eat less salt hasn't had much impact. Who knew that a Starbucks Java Chip Frappuccino Light Blended Coffee has 350 milligrams of sodium—about 15 percent of our daily allowance? The FDA said yesterday that it will review the Institute's recommendations "over the coming weeks" and work with "the food industry to support the reduction of sodium levels in the food supply."

Sounds good, right? But what if the food industry just swaps sodium for sugar? A study published yesterday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that all the added sugars in processed foods spell trouble for our cholesterol levels and our hearts. The more added sugars we eat, the more our LDL or "bad" cholesterol goes up and the more our HDL or "good" cholesterol goes down. We also get an unhealthy boost in triglycerides, blood lipids that are associated with diabetes. For this reason, the American Heart Association recently recommended [limiting added sugar intake](#) to no more than 5 percent of our total calories, which comes out to roughly 100 calories per day for women and 150 daily calories for men. (Me? I've almost met my daily limit and I haven't even eaten lunch yet. That fat-free vanilla latte cost me 48 calories with its 12 grams of added sugar. And two measly hard candies cost me 32 calories with their 8 grams of sugar.)

The food industry already responded to pressure from federal and state governments to ban trans fats in doughnuts, fries, and cookies, and the beverage industry is bracing for a tax on sugar-sweetened drinks. I'm curious, though, what packaged food makers will do with any new restrictions on sodium and sugar. Will they start pouring more fake substitutes into foods like the low-calorie sweetener sorbitol, which gives many folks gas? Or perhaps more cookies will be sweetened with Splenda? A 2008 Duke University study found that the artificial sweetener reduces the number of beneficial bacteria in the intestines. How about salt substitutes that contain potassium instead of sodium? [This FDA site](#) says they "could be harmful to people with certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, kidney disease, and heart disease." Those are the very folks who desperately need to reduce the salt in their diets. Unfortunately, the solution could be worse than the problem.

After all, the *JAMA* study authors admitted that one of the reasons why our intake of added sugars has surged in recent years may have to do with public health recommendations to limit cholesterol-raising dietary fat. Food manufacturers often chose to replace the fat in cookies with extra sugar. Remember the introduction of Snackwell's? "There is a need to review the dietary recommendations to see how they influence intake of added sugars," wrote the study authors from Emory University. Perhaps the same should hold true for any new regulations on salt and sugar. Clearly, Americans have to cut back on processed foods and hit the produce aisle more often. But before public health officials demand recipe changes for Oreos and Coke, they may want to first find out what the "twin evils" of sugar and salt will be replaced with.

Photo Gallery: [10 Salt Shockers That Could Make Hypertension Worse](#)

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