

FDA Proposes Regulating Salt in Food

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The [Cato Institute](#) has discovered a proposal by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to institute one of the most intrusive regulations yet in the food processing industry. This proposal, which was published for comments in the Federal Register on September 15, is laying the groundwork for setting federal targets for the reduction of salt levels in various foods.

The Federal Register notice observes that “taste for sodium is acquired and can be modified.” The regulation, if implemented, would affect directly the salt level in products that Americans buy at grocery stores or in restaurants. (The public comment period ends November 29.)

The original purpose of the Food and Drug Administration at the time of its creation 105 years ago was to prevent the sale of adulterated or misbranded drugs. The problem that led to this law was false or misleading information about what was in the drugs sold to the public. These days, almost every product sold in a grocery store has on its label extensive information about the calories, carbohydrates, fiber, protein, and other data about the food. And these labels can be helpful. Americans who inform themselves about medical research or receive instructions from private physicians actively seek this information. But this doesn't mean that more strict regulations are beneficial. (Even the labeling laws would not be necessary if laws were strictly enforced against fraud.)

To begin with, mandated reductions in salt are unnecessary. Consumers have a much greater interest in their own health than any federal regulators, and the labels are on everything they eat.

Moreover, what is appropriate for a certain individual, given his medical history and his age, may be different from someone else. Often patients, guided by personal doctors, have to find the best diet to balance a variety of different medical problems. Sometimes processed foods with relatively high salt content may be healthier for that patient, on balance, than other types of foods.

Quite aside from that, liberty implies the right to enjoy life, and that means the right to consume salt and other food at a pleasing level. When regulators define how much of any food or product one must consume, then it is a short step to instructing people to exercise or to go to bed at a certain time at night or to otherwise organize and live one's life the way that the government feels best.

Salt, of course, is not an adulteration of any product. It is not only a very natural and naturally occurring part of our diet, but it is indispensable for human life itself. Many foods would be unsavory, almost tasteless, without salt. Few chefs could cook without salt, and fewer would even want to do so. Salt is naturally pure: Table salt is a very simple chemical compound.

Any food at all, anything ingested into the human body at all, can be dangerous in excess. Even drinking too much water can be damaging to health, even though most people drink less water than they probably should. The goal of personal health should be guided by the same precepts long known from the wisdom of the ancient world: moderation and common sense.

Even these arguments against FDA regulation of processed food miss an obvious glitch: We all salt our food. When private corporations with handsomely paid nutritionists, tightly controlled processing, and a deep investment in customer goodwill add salt to our can of green beans or our fast-food hamburger, these folks know what they are doing and aim to do it in a way that does not lose customers. There are plenty of magazines and news stories about how much fat is in a Big Mac or salt in a KFC meal, and few corporations wish to have a news story that describes its food as the most unhealthy. Indeed, the energy of the free market with food processors and fast-food chains competing with each other would tend to create the optimum combination of taste, price, and health.

What happens, though, when these companies cannot make their own products the way they want? Ordinary consumers will buy salt and add salt to a level that pleases them. Unless the FDA proposes to limit, even, the extra condiments that restaurants routinely offer customers, then patrons of these restaurants may ask for and receive the relatively crudely calculated salt portions in a free packet for the more carefully measured amount in a recipe. Which is another way of saying: If the federal government intends to order us mortals into officially defined health, regulating salt put into food by processors and restaurants is only the first step.