



Sodium Reduction in Processed Foods



High sodium consumption has been directly linked to health issues such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. It may come as a surprise, but only 11 per cent of the salt we consume comes from what we add during home cooking and at the table.

The rest, says Doris Valade of Malabar Spice, a national supplier of ingredients to the food processing industry, is added by the manufacturer as a taste enhancer and preservative.

Valade should know because she was a member of the Sodium Working Group for the Canadian Meat Council, which reported



Doris Valade, Malabar Spice

to the multi-stakeholder task force established in 2007 by Health Canada to explore the key hurdles to achieving sodium reduction and help establish guidelines for processors. The Sodium Working Group

included representatives from food industry, academia, health and consumer advocacy groups, and various government departments and agencies, including Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. After extensive deliberation, the group produced the Sodium Reduction Strategy for Canada,

designed to help lower the sodium intake of Canadians from an estimated 3,400 mg/day/person to an interim goal of 2,300 mg/day/person by 2016.

To achieve that goal, the group focused on four key areas, the most important of which was the food supply itself. The group called for a structured voluntary

reduction of sodium levels in processed food products and foods sold in foodservice establishments. Mandatory reduction would have proved problematic based on current legislation for certain

food groups, as well as difficult to monitor. It was also recognized, however, that there would have to be extensive education of consumers, industry, health professionals and other key stakeholders and continued research followed by monitoring and evaluation of results.

For Valade and other members of the task force this was a good beginning. But in 2011, Health Canada disbanded the group deciding to focus primarily on education. There are many other initiatives, says Valade that Health Canada could undertake to make it a

lot easier and more attractive for processors to voluntarily comply with the benchmarks set out by the task force. One of these would be to allow more proactive labelling as they do in the United Kingdom and the United States. In Canada currently there are only two options for labelling where sodium reduction is concerned — “sodium reduced”, where a manufacturer reduces the sodium levels compared to their regular formulation — and “low sodium”, where the processor meets the Health Canada benchmarks for that product.

There are complications in some areas too. In meat processing for example, the CFIA regulations stipulate a minimum amount of salt that must be added to some products for food safety reasons. Because only sodium chloride is considered a ‘salt’, salt alternatives don’t qualify, meaning that processors have their hands tied when it comes to sodium replacement.

Specifically, the issue surrounds the use of potassium chloride, which is very similar to sodium chloride in its chemical composition. “Potassium functions much like sodi-



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um,” says Valade, “but it cannot be labelled as salt which is an obstacle to using it.”

The World Health Organization, she says, has determined we are not getting enough potassium in our diet, and is recommending we consume less sodium and more potassium. Indeed, dietary potassium may contribute to lowering blood pressure and decreasing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

“There has been a lot of science in the last 10 years on how potassium and sodium interact and there would be significant health benefits to adding potassium as a solution to sodium reduction without affecting taste or the chemical structure of the end product”.

Processors have been looking at potassium chloride as a salt replacer for a number of years. However, traditionally, potassium chloride can add a bitter taste to end products. Malabar, however, represents a company called Nu-Tek Food Science that has developed a unique product utilizing a patented wet chemistry process that produces a non-bitter, single-crystal that can be used as a 1:1 salt replacer in food applications. Nu-Tek Salt Advanced Formula Potassium Chloride can reduce sodium levels in foods by up to 50 percent with no difference in either sensory attributes, or functionality. The product is suited for traditional applications like processed meat and poultry, processed cheese and dairy, bakery and snack, as well as meals and entrees.

“Processors are becoming proactive,” says Valade. “No one wants to be found out later having high sodium levels in their products.” The result, says Valade, is a ‘stealth’ move to replace sodium quietly, without altering flavour or functionality. “Everyone wants to look good when Mom or Dad reads the label — it’s just one more reason for them to say YES to a good product in the supermarket, and to keep it on their shopping list.”

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