

Federal sodium guideline not worth its salt ?

By ACSH Staff — June 4, 2012

For quite [a while](#) ^[1] now, [ACSH](#) ^[2] has been [skeptical](#) ^[3] to say the least about the scientific basis of the prevailing federal dietary guidelines about salt intake. There is simply insufficient evidence to support the population-wide benefits of a low-salt diet (no more than 2,300 mg of sodium per day) and recent research has even suggested that such a diet could be harmful. So we were quite pleased to see the latest from health policy researcher Gary Taubes, acknowledging in *The New York Times* what the USDA and the FDA have yet to admit: "[Salt, We Misjudged You.](#)" ^[4]

Taubes' op-ed looks critically at the surprisingly flimsy foundation of low-salt guidelines, revisiting questionable assumptions, and he even considers the evidence in support of a goodly amount of salt in the diet. Strikingly, he points out that, when the link between a low-salt diet and preventing hypertension was first popularized by the National Institutes of Health in 1972, it was based on a hypothesis that had yet to be adequately tested: that the temporary increase in blood pressure caused by eating salty food leads to chronic hypertension and its multitude of adverse health effects.

What research does suggest, Taubes observes, is that reducing salt intake to what common guidelines recommend may do us more harm than good. In fact, such a diet has actually been associated with an increased risk of heart disease a finding for which there does seem to be a plausible biological mechanism.

Intriguingly, Taubes also notes how, for decades, experts fighting the conventional wisdom about salt were seen as playing into the food industry's hands a shill for the industry, as he puts it. Thus, few researchers spoke out and conventional wisdom has reigned for decades.

It seems, however, that the level of salt consumption in the U.S. has remained stable over the years, despite 40 years of the low-salt message. At about one and a half teaspoons daily, the average salt intake, according to recent research, remains at nearly 50 percent above federal recommendations Taubes says. Such consistency, he notes, suggests our salt intake is guided by physiological demands, not conscious choices.

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross notes that he came to a similar conclusion when researching the question back in 1998 which also happens to be when Taubes spent nearly a year on the topic. "One hopes that the federal guidelines will finally drop their adherence to outdated positions and revise their recommendations to conform to the accumulating contrary evidence," says Dr. Ross.

This recommendation has cause great upheavals in the food industry and, consequently, concern

among consumers both of which are really unnecessary, notes ACSH s Dr. Ruth Kava.

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