



HOW MANY MILLIGRAMS?

Salt makes just about everything taste a little better, at an annual cost of some 150,000 lives in the United States alone. In a nation in which a third of adults suffer from hypertension, salt is a prime culprit.

Reduce sodium content, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has suggested—even pleaded—and food manufacturers have tried to comply. But many have encountered a major obstacle: Many processed foods taste awful with less salt content; some of them are barely recognizable. Under pressure, scientists at Kellogg succeeded in fashioning low-sodium Cheez-Its, Corn Flakes, and Eggos . . . at the expense of color, texture, and taste. In other words: Lose salt, lose taste, lose customers. A salt reduction of any more than 10 percent, food manufacturers insist, is simply impractical.

And a one-tenth cut in processed foods' sodium levels would leave our intake solidly in the red zone. The average

American consumes about 3,500 mg of sodium daily—about three-quarters from processed foods—well above the suggested maximum of 2,300 mg and far more than the stringent 1,500 mg limit the FDA has long considered. Likely fearing that today's government recommendation will become tomorrow's mandate, the food industry and salt lobby have decided to challenge the FDA's salt guidelines. Kellogg states that a 1,500 mg target is "incompatible with a palatable diet."

In the meantime, consumption and production keep rising. The global industry harvests around 300 million tons of salt a year—that's 422 quadrillion mg—about a quarter of it from U.S. producers. Though Bolivia is not a major exporter, the country boasts the world's largest dry lake, Salar de Uyuni, shown above. The 4,085 square-mile salt flat formed when water evaporated, leaving behind deposits that workers shoveled into mounds to dry. Presumably, that's where the FDA prefers the salt remain. —Vadim Liberman

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