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Sugar and Salt

A study on sugar intake made the headlines of the evening news, but then was trumped by a recommendation on salt by the Institute of Medicine. Oh, joy, here we go again: are you ready to have the government set limits for how much salt manufacturers can put in your chips and other processed foods?

Could it happen? I am a bona fide salt-a-holic. I don't add it to foods, but I love foods with a lot of salt in them. I'm sure you have your preferences as well. In today's message, I'll review what's been said, who said it, and how it should and could affect your health habits.

Sugar and Serum Lipids

For the past 25 years, we've been taught that too much fat intake can raise your cholesterol. What did manufacturers do in response? They took out the fat and replaced it with—big drum roll—sugar. As a result, our sugar intake has increased. We know the relationship between sugar intake, obesity, and insulin resistance, but is there anything else that could be affected by high sugar intake? Yes, according to a study published this past week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (1).

Researchers examined data collected during the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study (NHANES). Briefly, blood samples were taken from over 6,000 subjects and analyzed for abnormal lipid levels: HDL-cholesterol (the good one), LDL-cholesterol (the bad one), and triglycerides. Nutrition data were collected during a phone interview using a 24-hour dietary recall. The subjects' diets were analyzed using the U.S. Department of Agriculture database of nutrients to determine sugar content from all sources, including drinks, snacks, and sweets. The sugar intake was divided into five categories ranging from less than 5% sugar intake to more than 25% intake from sugar. Most subjects fell into the category of more than 10% but less than 17.5%.

What was clear from the statistical analyses was that as sugar intake increased, HDL decreased, with the lowest HDL levels being in the group that got more than 25% of their calories from sugar. That group also had the highest LDL and the highest triglyceride levels—that completes the heart disease trifecta. One problem is that HDL is so hard to increase; the only real way to build HDL is regular exercise. This study tells us that another way may be to simply reduce sugar intake to less than 10%, which is what's considered desirable.

Salt Intake

As if the knock on sugar weren't enough, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a report that recommended that the Food and Drug Administration consider setting limits on the amount of sodium that manufacturers could put in processed foods (2). You can imagine how well that sits with all of us, but read their reasoning.

Current sodium intake by American adults is 3,400 mg per day. The recommended amount is 2,300 mg per day, so that means we're about 50% over what's considered healthy. The reason that's so bad is that it eventually leads to an increase in blood pressure. Some people process sodium differently than others but on average, as sodium intake goes, blood pressure follows.

The IOM reviewed the government and healthcare efforts to reduce sodium intake over the past 40 years and found that they lack effectiveness. They speculate that it may be related to the efforts to reduce fat intake, which

have been successful. The problem is that just like sugar, manufacturers added sodium to processed foods to improve flavor. Therefore, the IOM recommends that the FDA initiate a program to put limits on sodium content of manufactured foods—not ban it, but set limits.

It's hard to argue with their conclusions. For 40 years we've been told that we should reduce sodium, and we haven't done it. It's not just a private matter of each person's health, because U.S. healthcare spending is out of control. If we have a chance of reducing healthcare costs for treating hypertension and the associated diseases such as heart attacks and kidney failure, something has to be done. But really, doesn't the government have enough on its plate without adding regulation of sodium in manufactured foods?

The Bottom Line

High sugar intake results in abnormal cholesterol levels. High sodium intake results in hypertension. Do we need government controls to regulate these things? No. I believe in health education, and that's where the failure has been. We haven't taught the public how to interpret nutrition labels to know the salt and sugar content. We haven't made it a priority to teach people how much sodium they should eat in a day. Before you read this, did you know it was 2,300 mg per day? And have you checked nutrition labels to see how foods rate? I guarantee you'll be surprised at what you find.

Let's start the solution today very simply by each of us making a change to contribute to our overall health, and all of us together, the health of the nation. It's very basic: make a conscious decision to eat one additional serving of vegetables and one additional serving of fruit per day. The sodium content of these unprocessed foods is extremely low. They go up only when we add salt to them. Also, by eating more vegetables and fruit we'll replace some of the processed sugar in our diets. If we demonstrate we can correct our own course and take care of ourselves, maybe we can turn the health of the nation around—one person and one family at a time.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. JAMA. 2010;03(15): 1490-97.
2. Strategies to Reduce Sodium Intake in the United States. IOM. April 2010. www.iom.edu.

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