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FDA CONSIDERS REGULATION OF SALT AS A FOOD ADDITIVE

By Judy Lea Jones

A scientific panel was recently asked by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to examine the health effects of sodium. That panel has tentatively concluded that sodium, or salt, shouldn't be considered to be 'generally recognized as safe.' If the panel's final report affirms that finding, and if FDA agrees, sodium would be subject to FDA regulations covering use of food additives in processed foods. The FDA could then take a number of actions, including limiting the amount of salt in foods or requiring label disclosure.

Scientific evidence indicates that sodium can contribute to high blood pressure (hypertension), which, in turn, can lead to serious heart, circulatory (stroke), and kidney ailments. Thirty-five million Americans, including one out of four adults and a growing number of children, are estimated to have hypertension; another 25 million are thought to have borderline high blood pressure.

The primary source of sodium in the U.S. diet is salt (sodium chloride). The American diet today probably contains 3 or more teaspoons of salt a day, far more than the one-eighth teaspoon the body needs to meet the sodium requirement. Although there is some evidence that increased potassium intake might help offset the possible adverse effects of high sodium consumption, the most prudent course appears to be a reduction in daily salt intake to 5 grams (about 1 teaspoon) or less, according to Dietary Goals for the

U.S. Fulfillment of that prescribed goal could mean major changes in food choices and food processing techniques.

Since sodium occurs naturally in most foods, the average requirement would normally be met without consuming salt in processed foods or adding it in home food preparation.

The purchase of salt by consumers has declined somewhat as its use in processed and prepared foods has increased. More and more sodium intake is being determined implicitly through the purchase of processed foods rather than by the individual. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit scientific group, has said it will petition the FDA to limit the amount of salt added to processed foods and to require that the amount of salt in a product be listed on its label. The group wants a warning label for products that have an especially high salt content.

The FDA has said the possibility of establishing label requirements for disclosing sodium is one of the issues that it will consider in developing its planned 'food-labeling strategy' later this year. FDA, USDA, and the Federal Trade Commission have been holding hearings to consider nutrition labeling issues. FDA is still collecting and studying the evidence on sodium, and is not yet ready to make a decision on the petition by the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

POPULATION AND FOOD CONSUMPTION

By Larry Salathe

Population characteristics are often overlooked as factors that influence food consumption. The reasons are not obvious, but one explanation is that population characteristics appear to change slowly and therefore exert only minor influences on future food consumption. Such reasoning has little basis. Consider, for example, the age distribution of the U.S. population over time.

During 1950-1955, the U.S. population grew 9 percent, while the number in the age groups under 5 and between 5 and 13 years grew by 13.1 and 24.5 percent respectively (table 1). The growth in these age categories reflects the post World War II baby boom. The number 65 years and over also grew faster than total population.

In comparison, for the period 1970-1975 those in the age group under 5 and between 5 and 13 declined by 7.3 and 8.3 percent, respectively, while total U.S. population increased by 4.2 percent. At the same time, major increases occurred in the age groups 18 to 24, 25 to 34, and 65 years or over. Most of the growth in the 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 age groups (22.2 and 11.8 percent respectively) between 1970 and 1975 can be attributed to the maturing of children born shortly after World War II.

In addition to the number in the age categories 24 to 34 and 35 to 44, persons 65 years and over and under 5 years of age are expected to outpace total population growth between 1980 and 1985. The