

Salt, Sugar, Fat: Above the Legal Limit?

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By KRYSTAL GABERT, Editor, Food Manufacturing



Things are not looking up for manufacturers of the bacon-wrapped turkey-infused donut. I'm not sure that such a product is real, but the level of disappointment I've felt walking the grocery store aisles lately leads me to believe that it must be.

A CDC report released last month shows that a record number of U.S. states have an obesity rate of over 30 percent and that none met the 2000 goal of reducing statewide obesity to under 15 percent by 2010. The study also estimates obesity-related health care costs at \$147 billion.

Surely the causes of obesity are myriad, ranging from diet to genetics to nutrition. As public concern grows (along with waistlines and healthcare expenditures), it is reasonable to assume that a legislative eye will be turned on the food industry. Murmuring about federal sodium mandates has already begun as New York City has become the first to take a step toward regulating the sodium levels in foods sold in the city.

The new CDC report comes on the heels of this anti-sodium push in NYC and a long line of bad PR for the food industry — beginning, perhaps, with the movie *Food Inc.*, which painted the industry as a cabal devoted to the eradication of real food for the sake of profit. The blows continued with books such as former FDA Commissioner Dr. David Kessler's tome *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite*, which suggests that fat, sugar and salt are addictive at the level of hard drugs — and that they're designed that way on purpose.

This April, researchers at UCSF found evidence that backed up Dr. Kessler's claims when they showed that highly sugared foods triggered a dopamine response in the brain similar to the response triggered by morphine, nicotine and cocaine and that

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people who ate large quantities of processed foods experienced withdrawal and cravings similar to those experienced by drug addicts.

Perhaps in response to this flood of less-than-flattering information about the industry — and the increased scrutiny that always follows such studies — food manufacturers have been in a rush to cut sodium, fat and salt content, with Kellogg, H.J. Heinz, Kraft Foods, General Mills, Starbucks and PepsiCo being among those pledging recipe changes just this year.

These companies are making the smartest choices, both for consumers and for themselves. Criticism of the food industry, though often overblown, does have some merit. Much of the processed food available today has no redeeming nutritional value. If consumers eat healthier food, they'll be healthier people. If manufacturers make healthier food, they may be able to demonstrate to regulators that they are making an effort to take care of an industry problem on their own without the need for additional intervention. Manufacturers who refuse to reconsider giving their recipes a facelift, claiming that nutrition choices are personal choices — whether right or wrong — are inviting regulators to make those recipe changes for them.

When personal health and nutritional choices begin to cost over \$100 billion annually — health care costs that are paid by the insurance premiums to which we all contribute — consumers already making healthy, responsible choices may begin asking themselves: How is your triple bacon double cheeseburger a "personal" choice when I'm the one left footing the bill?

Are American consumers' salt, sugar and fat intake over the top? Should there be a legal limit or regulatory intervention? Let me know by e-mailing me at krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com [1].

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