

Working Together to Address the Sodium Challenge

Bill Graves, senior vice president of product research, Dairy Research Institute

Public health concerns about the amount of sodium in the American diet and the associated risk of high blood pressure have pushed sodium into the spotlight. Many government and health professionals have made public calls for voluntary reduction of salt in packaged and restaurant foods.

The dairy industry recognizes the importance of the challenge to reduce the amount of sodium in Americans' diets and supports public health initiatives to work with food manufacturers and all stakeholders to educate the public about healthy-eating options. This effort includes product development and consumer research as well as identifying and sharing best practices to provide solutions to address public-health concerns while maintaining taste, functionality and food safety.

The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, based in Rosemont, Ill., is working with the Dairy Research Institute and other experts across the industry to share the most current consumer, sensory, nutrition and product analytical research that addresses emerging issues and opportunities for cheese. Through this pre-competitive industry collaboration, best practices for reducing salt in the cheesemaking process are being defined.

For instance, the Innovation Center recently completed a comprehensive audit of cheese products in the market, which identified significant variability in the amount of sodium content in commercially available cheeses. Reducing this variability can lead to more effective efforts to reduce the sodium content of cheeses in the market. With the increased attention on sodium, today's consumers are more closely examining product nutrition labels for sodium content.

According to Chicago-based Mintel International, more Americans are becoming concerned about sodium intake and are taking steps to monitor this intake by paying closer attention to package labeling. Reducing the variability of sodium content could help manufacturers improve label accuracy to better reflect the sodium content of their cheese.

At a symposium sponsored by Dairy Management Inc. at the 2010 American Dairy Science Association (ADSA) meeting, industry experts shared the latest advancements toward reducing sodium in cheese, including the role salt plays in cheese microbiology, the important dietary nutrients of cheese, and flavor development and processes for making reduced-sodium cheese.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends limiting dietary sodium intake to 2,300 mg per day for middle-aged and older adults, African-Americans and those with hypertension. The recommended limit is 1,500 mg per day. On average, U.S. consumers ingest about 3,400 mg per day of sodium—50% higher than the current recommended intake. A report from the 2010 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee released in June recommends gradually lowering the current sodium intakes of adults and children to an eventual goal of 1,500 mg per day. The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is expected to be released by the end of 2010.

"While cheese represents 7.8% of sodium consumption in our country, we know that cheese has multiple nutritional benefits and can play a vital role as part of a healthy diet," said Greg Miller, president, Dairy Research Institute and a contributing columnist for *Dairy Foods*. "Not only does cheese taste great – it also contributes 21% of the calcium, 11% of

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the phosphorus, 9% of the protein, 9% of the Vitamin A and 8% of the zinc in the American diet. We are working closely with the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy to take a leadership role in partnering with academic, science and health professionals to map out a plan to address sodium concerns."

Diligent monitoring of the regulatory and public-health environments and consumer marketplace will continue to be important. Upcoming Innovation Center work includes the release of a white paper, "Sodium: Insights for the Dairy Industry," which provides a snapshot of the regulatory environment and also examines consumer insights and challenges as well as opportunities for reducing sodium in cheese.

"Millions of adults have grown up eating, cooking with and enjoying the many benefits of cheese," Miller said. "In order to stay relevant to consumers, ongoing research will help ensure that they will continue to appreciate cheese and cheese products as a satisfying, healthy and nutritious food for generations to come."

For more information on dairy product research and nutrition research, go to www.innovatewithdairy.com and www.usdairy.com.