

Consumer Trends: Education Programs Impact Salty Food Purchase Decisions

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. (Newswise) — A new study by marketing researchers at the University of Arkansas shows that American consumers ignore the amount sodium they eat, even though excessive sodium intake contributes to cardiovascular disease. The good news is that education campaigns about the effects of excessive sodium intake work: Consumers – both hypertensive and non-hypertensive – will modify their purchase intentions if they are given this information.

Sodium is pervasive in the American diet. It is the primary ingredient of table salt and is found in many processed foods. The finding that Americans are unaware of their sodium intake is disturbing because, on average, Americans consume 50 percent more than the daily maximum recommended level for sodium.

“Simply put, Americans consume too much salt,” said Scot Burton, professor in the Sam M. Walton College of Business. “Unfortunately, only approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population currently consumes the recommended daily level. Reducing the daily intake of sodium from the average of more than 3,400 milligrams down to the recommended level of 2,300 milligrams could potentially prevent almost 100,000 deaths and 66,000 strokes per year while saving billions of dollars in health care costs.”

Knowing this, policymakers and public health officials are considering both public education campaigns and the possibility of legislation to address the problem. But to do this effectively, they need good information, not only about the amount of sodium consumed, which the national Centers for Disease Control monitors, but also about consumer knowledge and attitudes. How does information on the Nutrition Facts panel, restaurant menus or within educational materials change perceptions about the health effects of sodium and influence shoppers’ intentions to purchase a product?

To answer this question and inform public health officials, Burton, research partner Elizabeth Howlett, also a marketing professor in the Walton College, and colleagues Andrea Tangari at Wayne State University and Myla Bui of Loyola Marymount University conducted several studies. Their goal was to obtain greater insight into consumer attitudes about excessive sodium consumption and to provide information that can be used in future public health interventions and education.

Of particular interest was whether consumers who suffer from hypertension are influenced by the disclosure of sodium information. To examine this question, the researchers considered menu items from popular table-service restaurants. Many table-service restaurants serve large meals that can contain up to two days’ worth

of sodium. Half of the participants were given menus with calorie information only, and the other half were presented with menus that contained calorie, sodium and saturated fat information.

Hypertensive and non-hypertensive consumers responded differently to the disclosure of sodium information. Despite levels of sodium ranging between one to two days' worth, the purchase decisions of non-hypertensive consumers were not affected by the revelation that the product had high sodium content. The researchers found that these consumers ignored sodium information, and did not integrate that information into their product evaluation and choice.

"While it is encouraging that hypertensive consumers pay some attention to sodium levels," said Howlett, "it is worrisome that non-hypertensive consumers do not. Because the effects of excessive sodium intake are cumulative, many who are not yet diagnosed as hypertensive are probably not paying attention to how much salt they consume. It is important that all consumers, especially those middle-aged and older, limit their consumption of salty foods, so I think these studies suggest that many consumers would benefit from a better understanding of the cumulative and negative health effects of excessive sodium intake."

With this in mind, the researchers also examined the potential effect of a salt-reduction educational campaign within the context of packaged foods. If consumers understood the negative health implications associated with long-term, excessive sodium intake, would sodium become more personally relevant and thus have a greater influence on consumers' evaluation process? This experiment addressed how purchase intentions and perceived risk for cardiovascular disease were influenced by three factors - product sodium level, hypertension status and the provision of educational materials about the negative effects of sodium. The researchers found that providing educational materials was associated with a decrease in purchase intentions and an increase in perceptions about the risk of cardiovascular disease for higher sodium products. This was the case for both hypertensive and non-hypertensive consumers.

"This research confirmed notions that an education campaign could benefit all consumers by raising their consideration of sodium content information," Howlett said.

The researchers' findings were published in the American Marketing Association's Journal of Public Policy & Marketing.

Burton holds the Wal-Mart Chair in Marketing.

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