Dissent on Salt,

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On Monday, January 11, 2009, New York City’s Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley announced sodium reduction targets for restaurants and food manufacturers. Dr. Farley said that this was done to prevent premature deaths from heart attacks and strokes. In contrast, New York City’s Dr. Michael Alderman, Professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine has stated that “the available data provide no support for any universal recommendation of a particular level of dietary sodium.”

Sodium intake does not vary much around the world. When we examined the data from over 19,000 people from 33 countries (Josh see McCarron et al) we found that sodium intake ranged from 2,700 – 4,900 mg daily. This may be because sodium appetite (or the behaviors that drive us to consume salt) causes people to naturally regulate their salt intake within a narrow range. If sodium intake is too low, blood pressure can increase. If sodium intake is too high, blood pressure can increase. However, in carefully controlled experiments, Dr. Norman Hollenberg at Harvard Medical School, writes that in studies people when given really high levels of sodium, 8050 mg per day, there was no effect on blood pressure but an increase to 18,400 mg did increase blood pressure. The lower level is much higher than what the average American consumes.

For people at high risk for heart disease, there is some justification to restrict sodium intake. Salt can increase blood pressure in people who are older, black, salt sensitive and those who have kidney damage. But, based on a study done in Italy, even for high risk patients the data are not clear. My practical advise is that patients should work with their doctors to see what approach works best including prescribing certain drugs.

People under some conditions actually need more sodium. For example, people who work and exercise in hot and human environments like during the summer in New York City. If people who run the New York City Marathon do not get enough sodium, they can collapse from heat stroke. So can football players who train outdoors The NY Yankees and NY Mets, especially pitchers, are not immune.

Until this is done, New York City’s campaign to “Hold the Salt” is simplistic, misguided and not based in science. It cannot our change our physiology and it violates the principle to “Do no harm.”

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