

Using Contracts to Reduce Sodium in Government Food Environments



Problem

Excess dietary sodium can lead to heart disease and stroke, which together accounted for 26% of all Los Angeles County deaths in 2012. However, reducing sodium intake is a challenge for consumers. More than 75% of the sodium that Americans consume comes from packaged and restaurant foods.

Project

To address these challenges, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health is working with both public and private institutions (such as worksites) that serve or sell food, to include healthier, lower sodium options for employees and community members who buy and consume food in these settings.

Outcomes

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health partnered with the County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office, which administers the county's largest vending machine contract, to implement healthy nutrition standards. The average sodium per packaged snack in vending machines has been reduced by 89 milligrams (30%) within the first 8 months after implementation.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Salt www.cdc.gov/salt
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health www.publichealth.lacounty.gov

Statement of Problem: Too much sodium increases the risk of developing high blood pressure (also known as hypertension), the leading risk factor for heart disease and stroke. In 2011, 24% of adults surveyed in Los Angeles County had been diagnosed with hypertension. In 2012, heart disease and stroke were also the greatest and ninth greatest causes of premature death, respectively, accounting for more than a quarter (26%) of all Los Angeles County deaths that year.

On average, American adults consume more than 3,500 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day—far above the *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommendation of 2,300 mg or less per day. Sodium reduction can be a challenge for consumers, as more than 75% of sodium consumed comes from packaged and restaurant foods. Foods offered and sold in vending machines and food service venues, such as cafeterias and snack shops, can affect health significantly at the population level.

Project Description: Since 2010, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) has participated in CDC's **Sodium Reduction in Communities Program**, allowing LACDPH to work with public and private institutions that serve or sell food to change their food environments to include healthier, lower sodium options for employees and community members. LACDPH partnered with food service operations on government property, including cafes, snack shops, worksite cafeterias, and vending machines. LACDPH also worked with afterschool snack programs and programs that distribute meals to institutionalized populations. With more than 100,000 employees across multiple county departments and even more people accessing county-provided services, LACDPH estimates that 37 million snacks and meals are served yearly on county government premises.

In March 2011, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors adopted a **motion** giving LACDPH the authority to review all county government food service and vending contracts. The motion allows LACDPH to make recommendations for healthy nutrition standards and procurement practices, including sodium reduction plans and limits for entrees, sides, and snack options, within the final contracts. LACDPH also educates vendors about healthy nutrition strategies. By implementing sodium reduction plans and sodium limits in food procurement contracts, LACDPH is leveraging the county's purchasing power to provide healthier nutrition options.



“Participating in CDC’s Sodium Reduction in Communities Program allowed LACDPH to work with public and private institutions . . . to change their food environments to include healthier, lower sodium options for employees and community members.”

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LACDPH has incorporated several sodium reduction strategies within the contracts, requiring vendors to do the following:

- Implement gradual sodium reduction plans within 12 months of contract start.
- Work with LACDPH staff to implement sodium purchasing standards for individual food categories (e.g., grains, meats) and work with departments serving special populations to meet specific standards relevant to those populations.
- Provide a minimum number or percentage of lower sodium choices.
- Offer reduced-size portions for entrees.

Outcomes: In 2013, LACDPH partnered with the Chief Executive Office, which administers the county’s largest vending machine contract. The contract outlined vending machine nutrition standards and affected 325 vending machines (132 snack and 193 beverage machines) across 174 locations and 16 departments. Contract language required that packaged snacks contain no more than 360 mg of sodium per food item or package and that snacks adhere to other nutrition guidelines addressing fat, sugar, and calorie contents.

Before these changes, LACDPH found that the average sodium per snack package was 294 mg. Since implementation, the number of healthy snack options sold in machines has increased. The average sodium per snack package decreased by 89 mg (30%) within 8 months, and further decreases are expected over time.

LACDPH continues to partner with county departments to implement and operationalize comprehensive nutrition standards, including sodium limits and gradual sodium reduction plans, into food services and vending contracts. Beyond affecting the Chief Executive Office vending contract, LACDPH has worked with 6 additional departments of the total 12 county departments that offer or provide food, including the Department of Health Services, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Department of Public Works, the Department of Beaches and Harbors, the Department of Child and Family Services, and the Probation Department.

Conclusions: LACDPH’s success suggests that contracts are valuable tools for establishing sodium reduction practices within government departments that serve and/or sell food. As LACDPH continues its efforts to make lower sodium options more available within the food environment, future plans include further reducing sodium in snacks by implementing limits for packaged snacks in vending machines to 200 mg of sodium based on the revised 2014 Los Angeles County vending machine nutrition policy. LACDPH also plans to expand its evaluation practices to include data collection that will monitor sodium intake and dissemination of results.