

## Sodium Levels in U.S. Packaged Foods in 2018

**Summary:** High sodium intake contributes to cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S. Setting sodium targets for packaged foods can help reduce a key source of dietary sodium.

This report uses national packaged food information from 2018, incorporating both sodium content and food category sales data, to assess progress toward the first set of U.S. Food and Drug Administration sodium targets.

In 2021, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced voluntary short-term sodium targets for 2024 for 136 packaged and 84 restaurant food categories (Phase I), with the promise of further targets.<sup>1</sup> In 2024, the FDA announced draft voluntary targets for 2027 (Phase II).<sup>2</sup> The Phase I targets were the first of their kind from the FDA for any nutrient and provide an opportunity to support sodium reduction if appropriately monitored and lowered over subsequent phases. The FDA set two kinds of targets: a sales-weighted mean (SWM) target for each food category and an upper bound target for any product in that category, using baseline data from 2010.<sup>1</sup>

The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (Health Department) assessed progress toward the Phase I FDA targets among top-selling products based on a national database of U.S. packaged foods from 2018.

**How did we use the data?** The NYC Health Department created a Popular Packaged Food dataset to assess the sodium concentration of the highest-selling packaged foods, categorized according to FDA food categories using data the Health Department had access to as part of building the [National Salt Reduction Initiative](#) (NSRI) database. The NSRI database, described in detail in previous research,<sup>3</sup> includes Nielsen sales data from 2017 linked by Universal Product Code to nutrition data from Label Insight and manufacturer websites in 2018 for 62 NSRI packaged food categories.<sup>4</sup>

Of the 136 packaged food categories included in Phase I, 93 had enough overlap with the categories included in the NSRI database to identify the top 10 highest-selling products within those categories by units sold, referred to here as “popular products.” Ten categories were excluded from the analysis because nutrition information for two or more of the 10 most popular products in the category was either missing or collected before 2016. For the 83 remaining categories, the SWM sodium concentration was calculated and products were assessed for proximity to the upper bound.

### What did we find?

*Sales-Weighted Mean Target Analysis:* Of the categories analyzed, the SWM sodium concentration of popular products in 15 categories (18%) already met the Phase I FDA SWM target, the SWMs of 52 categories (63%) were within 20% of the FDA target, and the remaining 16 categories (19%) had a SWM that was more than 20% higher than the FDA target (Figure 1). Overall, 74 categories (89%) contained at least one popular product that already met the FDA SWM 2024 target.

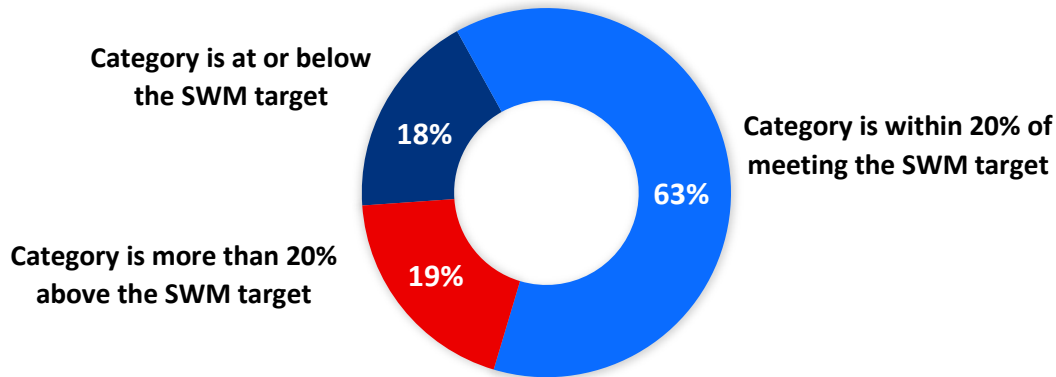
<sup>1</sup> U.S. FDA. Guidance for industry: voluntary sodium reduction goals. October 2021. Accessed June 9, 2022. <https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/guidance-industry-voluntary-sodium-reduction-goals>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. FDA. Guidance for industry: voluntary sodium reduction goals. August 2024. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/draft-guidance-industry-voluntary-sodium-reduction-goals-edition-2>

<sup>3</sup> Moran AJ, Wang J, Sharkey AL, Dowling EA, Curtis CJ, Kessler KA. US food industry progress toward salt reduction, 2009-2018. *Am J Public Health*. 2022;112(2):325-333. doi:[10.2105/AJPH.2021.306571](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306571); PMID:[35080946](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35080946/); PMCID:[PMC8802589](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PMC8802589/)

<sup>4</sup> NYC Health Department. National Salt Reduction Initiative packaged food categories and targets. <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/cardio/packaged-food-targets.pdf>

**Figure 1.** Percent of Categories (N = 83) Meeting the FDA Sales-Weighted Mean (SWM) Sodium Target<sup>a</sup> Based on Sodium Content of Popular Products<sup>b</sup> in Each Category From the National Salt Reduction Initiative Packaged Food Database, 2018

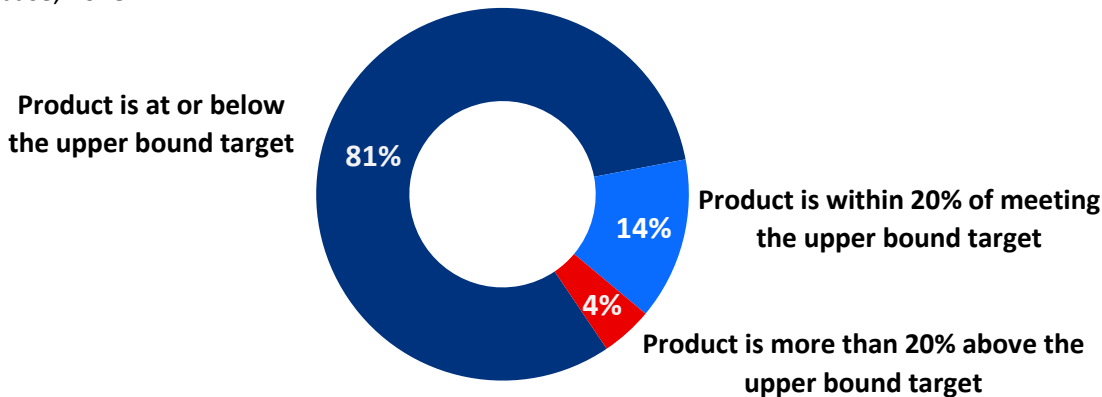


<sup>a</sup> FDA sales-weighted mean (SWM) sodium target is the sodium concentration (milligrams of sodium per 100 grams of food) weighted by the sales volume of individual products in the category.

<sup>b</sup> Popular products are defined as the top 10 highest-selling products in each category by units sold.

*Upper Bound Target Analysis:* There were 803 popular products with nutrition information available included in the 83 analyzed categories. A total of 654 products (81%) had a sodium concentration value that met the FDA 2024 upper bound target for their category, while 113 products (14%) were within 20% of the upper bound target and 36 (4%) were more than 20% higher (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Percent of Popular Products<sup>a</sup> Meeting the FDA Upper Bound Sodium Target<sup>b</sup> for Their Category (N = 803) Based on Product Sodium Content From the National Salt Reduction Initiative Packaged Food Database, 2018



<sup>a</sup> Popular products are defined as the top 10 highest-selling products in each category by units sold.

<sup>b</sup> The upper bound sodium target is for the sodium concentration of an individual food product included in a category.

**Note:** Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

**Conclusions:** This analysis found that for many categories the SWM of popular products already met or was close to the Phase I FDA targets as of 2018. Further, the sodium concentration of most popular products was already below the upper bound target. We look forward to FDA's continued reporting of industry progress toward both Phase I and Phase II targets as part of a transparent, public process to lower the sodium content of the food supply.