The World Health Organization calls hypertension the leading risk factor for death in the world. In Canada, salt-induced elevated blood pressure likely causes as many as 15,000 fatal heart attacks and strokes annually.

Most of us consume double the recommended intake of sodium, and much of it is beyond our control. That’s because three-quarters of our dietary sodium shows up in restaurant food and is already in prefab foods like bread, breakfast cereals, processed meats, cheese and soups. Only 11 per cent comes from salt we add at our kitchen tables or stoves, and just 12 per cent occurs naturally in food.

Many food additives, even low-sodium salt substitutes and comparatively benign vitamin C, are restricted by federal regulations. However, salt itself continues to pour freely.

Companies add so much salt that Health Canada officials responsible for revising Canada’s Food Guide in 2007 declared that it is “almost impossible to design a diet” with less than 2,300 mg of sodium per day, the so-called Safe Upper Limit (UL) developed by the U.S. Institute of Medicine (IOM). Yet experts are urging adults to aim for 1,500 mg per day, the IOM’s Adequate Intake (AI). If that standard was used for food labels, sodium numbers would definitely give us all greater pause.

The amount of sodium reported in the Nutrition Facts tables on packaged foods is based on a “serving” and expressed as a percentage of the 2,400 mg Daily Value set by Health Canada. But food manufacturers routinely undermine this information by manipulating the size of the servings. In our recent study (Salty to a Fault) of some 300 foods, we found that only 20 per cent of the categories of similar groceries consistently used a common serving size. There were wide variations in recommended serving sizes in a host of processed foods: from 30 g to 55 g for salami, 15 mL to 30 mL for salad dressing, and 215 g to 340 g for frozen macaroni and cheese. We can hardly expect harried or mathematically disinclined shoppers to pick lower-sodium foods when companies are playing such shell games.

The results were no better in restaurant foods we examined. Leaving aside soft drinks and desserts (which rarely have much added salt), you’d be hard pressed to find many menu items with less than 300 mg of sodium — 20 per cent of the daily AI. Many foods contain two or more whole days’ worth. The survey revealed significant differences in the amounts of sodium in comparable serving sizes of similar foods — as much as elevenfold in a 70 g serving of french fries, for example (40 mg at Swiss Chalet versus 556 mg at Harvey’s). Menus remain exempt from nutrition label laws, but, at the very least, restaurant owners should be required to post calories and to red flag high-sodium foods.

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In 2007, Health Canada wisely appointed a Sodium Working Group — government officials, food industry representatives, researchers and health advocates — to develop a strategy to reduce sodium intake. The model is the U.K. government’s pioneering approach of setting sodium-reduction targets for dozens of food categories. Two years after the U.K. set voluntary targets, average daily sodium intake fell by 160 mg per person — a huge achievement for public health. But a drop of 1,040 mg is what’s needed to achieve the government’s goal.

Whether the targets we set are regulated or voluntary, Canada must vigilantly monitor sodium levels in foods to ensure that companies deliver reductions. Please urge the feds to pull out all the stops to help cut the salt. Visit www.cspinet.ca for details.