# Instant solution to unhealthy product

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They are tasty, cheap, and convenient, but also very harmful to one’s health. With massive global appeal of instant noodles, it’s about time manufacturers take on the challenge of making their product safer for public consumption. It all boils down to cutting down on the salt, sugar, and fat content of instant noodles.

It’s a challenge that certainly won’t have instant results given the enormous size of the industry, which is projected to grow from $61 billion in 2024 to $98 billion by 2032. Nonetheless, it is a critical and necessary action that manufacturers must take given the popularity of instant noodles and the harm they pose to public health.

Members of the World Instant Noodles Association (Wina) signed this week the “Manila Declaration” at the end of the World Instant Noodles Summit held in Taguig City setting goals for the industry including reducing salt and fat in instant noodles and ensuring the safety of ingredients and food processes.

The world consumes 100 million instant noodle meals a year, according to Wina, with China, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Japan, and the United States among the top consumers. The Philippines ranks seventh with about 4 billion packs consumed in 2023. This huge appetite has been attributed to the popularity of “pancit canton” among Filipinos known for their carbohydrate-heavy diet.

The noodles are quick to prepare and, at a time when food prices have been constantly increasing, they are very cheap. They are also very accessible and can be bought even from the humble neighborhood sari-sari stores in barangays and remote villages.

## Serious health issues

For many poor households, and very commonly, for struggling students on a tight budget, they are a lifesaver—the soup warms the stomach and the noodles are enough to alleviate the hunger pangs. Workers also eat them as a quick snack.

However, accessibility and affordability gloss over the real cost of an instant noodle pack: it is low in nutrients and high in sodium. Many studies back claims that overconsuming them increases the risk of metabolic syndrome, defined as a group of conditions that together raise the risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and other serious health issues.

The World Health Organization recommends less than 2,000 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day or just under a teaspoon. An instant noodle pack, meanwhile, contains a staggering 1,500 mg to over 2,000 mg of sodium.

A 2017 study published on the National Center for Biotechnology Information website (“Know Your Noodles! Assessing Variations in Sodium Content of Instant Noodles across Countries” by Clare Farrand et al.) assessed the sodium content of 765 instant noodle products from 10 countries and found an “extremely wide variation” with products in China having the highest mean sodium content and New Zealand having the lowest.

## Health rating labels

“The huge variations in mean sodium content of products in different countries clearly demonstrates significant potential to reduce the sodium content of noodles sold worldwide,” the authors said.

They noted that manufacturers have managed to produce instant noodles with far less sodium and that consumers have accepted these products. “This is evidence that reformulation of instant noodles is feasible, both technologically as well as from a consumer acceptability perspective,” they said, adding that it is also possible for countries to set targets and make this a public policy tool.

In 2022, the Department of Trade and Industry said it was ready to pull out instant noodles from retail markets if the Food and Drug Administration issued a recall order amid high sodium content issues; but nothing came out of it.

The following year, Sen. Raffy Tulfo filed Senate Bill 1684 proposing to put health rating labels on packaged food products, including instant noodles, to help Filipinos make healthy choices. The bill is still pending at the committee level.

## National policy

The government even flirted with the idea of taxing food with high sodium or sugar content to raise revenues and at the same time serve as a measure to tackle the growing problem of diabetes, obesity, and non-communicable diseases related to poor diet. In 2023, however, then Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno said instant noodles would be exempted from the proposal because they serve as a cheap staple for the poor. Last year, Diokno’s successor Ralph Recto said the proposal had been scrapped and the Marcos administration has no intention of reviving it.

This makes the commitment from instant noodle manufacturers a crucial and very important step but the government must complement it with a national policy. This could be through legislating health labels and warnings on food products or imposing sodium reduction targets on the industry. These initiatives from both public and private sectors would be crucial ingredients in making instant noodles less of a menace to one’s health while remaining palatable to consumers.