



# questiontime

**This month's question:** *Are the salt reduction targets realistic?*

The UK is the world leader in salt reduction, something that we should all be proud of. But despite our nation's proven ability many within our industry are questioning whether or not the current salt reduction targets are achievable. Why is this? Well, the process of reducing salt is a complex and extensive one, and while many manufacturers and retailers are making headway in their salt reduction commitments, there are certain areas that are proving to be a challenge. So, are the targets just that – a challenge – or are they unrealistic? There are a handful of companies who have managed to achieve the targets, so does it follow that the rest of the industry should automatically be able to do the same? Do the targets present genuine risks to the taste/appearance/shelf-life of the products? Or have these concerns been exaggerated? Over to you, panel...

**KATHERINE JENNER**  
Campaign Director, Cash

The UK is leading the world on salt reduction, with what is considered "the most successful nutrition policy since the Second World War". The reduction in salt intakes to date, from 9.5g per day in 2000/01 to 8.1g in 2011, is already preventing approximately 17,000 heart attacks and strokes a year, half of which would have been fatal while also saving the NHS billions of pounds a year. This could be increased to 36,000 if we reduce salt intakes to 6g per day.

The targets are realistic, but for a few categories are challenging. At Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH), we have been able to report examples of products meeting the 2012 targets in each of the different categories, demonstrating that acceptable technical solutions to salt reduction are increasingly widely available. In addition, the recent report from Leatherhead is very encouraging, and provides guidance for manufacturers looking to reduce salt. We believe that these findings clearly demonstrate that the targets are realistic when the right support and information is given. If one leading company can meet the targets, so can all the rest.

So why haven't they been met already? The target based approach to salt reduction relies on creating a "level playing field", with equal reductions made across the board, to ensure that consumers accept the reductions in salt being made. The problem at the moment is that wide variations can still be seen and in particular the catering sector, who were wrongly omitted from the first phase of the campaign

by the Food Standards Agency, are lagging behind and having to play catch up with the rest of the industry.

The Leatherhead report provides food companies with valuable information to achieve their salt reduction goals and indicates that gradual reductions of salt, coupled with the use of potassium-based salt or other ingredient-based solutions, can maintain taste, appearance and shelf life of products. CASH urges all manufacturers to share their expertise across the food sector, to achieve that all-important level-playing field, in line with the recommendations of the Responsibility Deal.

CASH have always been clear that we do not accept 'taste' as an acceptable technical barrier, as excess salt in the diet is such a serious problem, and because taste buds will adjust to less salt given market-wide reductions.

There have been unsubstantiated claims that consumers simply add salt back in to their food, but, as shown by the reduction in population average salt intakes, and the IRI analysis showing a decline in salt sales – this argument simply does not stand up. In reality, the majority of people haven't even noticed a change. A great example being the 'furore' over the HP Sauce recipe change – only one customer, a very heavy user, reported a change in taste yet the product had already been on shelf for a year!

Additionally, Mintel's Seasoning Research reported that products that have low or reduced sodium levels have actually gained share, with a growth in sales of low-sodium table salt products and I can report a huge increase in

consumers looking for lower salt options of their favourite products. CASH feel that the issue of whether consumers will reject products with less salt has been vastly over-stated and in reality there is now a danger for companies that it is the higher salt products that will be rejected compared to lower salt options.

I sense that the tide is starting to turn, and that those companies brave enough to challenge the trend for products with far more salt than they need, will reap the benefits in the long term. After all, customers who have died from a heart attack, heart failure, stroke or stomach cancer, don't shop!

**BARBARA GALLANI**  
Director Of Food Safety  
And Science, FDF

Salt reduction in food continues to be a priority for food manufacturers. In particular, Food and Drink Federation (FDF) members have shown leadership over many years in changing the recipes of some of Britain's best-loved brands so that they are lower in salt. Since 2006 FDF members have reduced the salt in their products by over 9 per cent. The effect of this on-going contribution to salt reduction was reflected in the data released by the Department of Health (DH) at the end of June. These data showed a small but significant downward trend over the last ten years in people's salt intake.

Salt plays an important role in the taste, texture, shelf-life and safety of foods. A successfully reformulated product must maintain all of these functions and remain acceptable to the consumer. Importantly, if any of

**“If people are eating the wrong balance of foods, as is suggested by the obesity rise and National Diet and Nutrition Survey data, then they are probably also taking in too much salt. Any further reformulation must sit alongside an education and awareness programme.”**



Our panel agrees that in order to create the necessary "level playing field" increased support from the catering industry is required

these functions are compromised and result in a negative impact on quality or flavour, consumers may respond by adding salt or switching to higher-salt products, losing the intended health benefit.

The commitment to salt reduction in the food manufacturing sector has been strong for many years and the salt pledge was one of the first to be developed under the Public Health Responsibility Deal, when this initiative was launched in March 2011. The pledge states that signatories "commit to the salt targets for the end of 2012 agreed by the Responsibility Deal, which collectively will deliver a further 15 per cent reduction on 2010 targets.

For some products this will require acceptable technical solutions which we are working to achieve. These targets will give a total salt reduction of nearly 1g per person per day compared to 2007 levels in food. We recognise that achieving the public health goal of consuming no more than 6g of salt per person per day will necessitate action across the whole industry, Government, NGOs and individuals. While many FDF

companies signed up they also indicated that in some cases this would only be possible if new solutions were found to help preserve and flavour food.

To assist companies in their effort to further reduce salt in certain food categories, FDF and the British Retail Consortium (BRC) commissioned independent research by Leatherhead Food Research. The report published in July showed that a number of potential future methods exist to reduce the salt content of foods. These included for example the use of certain mineral salts or the resizing/restructuring of salt crystals. Some of the solutions identified require considerably more scientific development and trialling to establish their safety for consumption. This means it will take some time before they can be implemented. So despite the continued commitment by manufacturers and retailers to reduce salt, the report suggests that in the future, salt reduction will likely be achieved through small changes to individual products rather than dramatic reductions across entire ranges.

With retailers and major brands

reaching the limit of what they can do until there are further scientific advances, the question is where next? We believe that at this stage the focus should be on encouraging more companies to sign up to the Responsibility Deal's salt pledge as well as on educating consumers to add less salt when cooking and to taste food at the table before adding salt. We welcome the work within the Responsibility Deal to engage with the hospitality sector on salt reduction with the release of three new salt pledges targeted specifically at catering businesses.

The pledges commit companies to reduce the use of salt by 15 per cent in their kitchens, to ensure that at least 50 per cent of products procured meet the 2012 salt targets and/or to reformulate their dishes to reduce salt, with a focus on those which currently make the greatest contribution to salt intake. For many caterers this is the start of a process that food manufacturers and retailers have been undertaking for many years. Our intention is that the methods outlined in the recently published salt reduction report will help them on this journey.



Opinion is divided as to whether or not solutions to salt reduction need further developing

**CLAIRE HUGHES**  
**Head Of Nutrition, M&S**

M&S started working on salt reduction in the late 1990s, starting with bread, as we were aware of the growing public health issue linking high salt intakes to high blood pressure. Our approach on salt reduction has always been to reduce levels in small increments of 5-10 per cent, as usually these go unnoticed by the customers. This takes time and you need to make small reductions throughout the year. This approach helped us deliver the British Retail Consortium salt targets in 2005 and then the Food Standards Agency 2010 voluntary targets, with a couple of exceptions -

processed cheese and one tinned sweetcorn product. These contain a tiny bit of salt and if we take it out, it doesn't deliver on quality and taste.

We also signed up to the Responsibility Deal salt pledge to meet the 2012 voluntary salt targets. Although we are making good progress and should meet over 60 per cent of the targets, there are areas that are proving challenging. Some of the challenges are taste and texture, which in a product area such as Chinese meals is linked to the ingredients used in the recipes to give an authentic taste.

As the salt reduction work has focused a lot more on packaged food than meals served in restaurants, takeaways and meals

taken from recipe books, reducing the salt too much in these areas can leave the customer with a disappointing experience. The other challenge is food safety, which due to the role of salt in foods such as cured meats, meeting the salt targets could either mean a reduction in shelf life, not appropriate from a food waste perspective, or presents a microbiological risk. We've always said that even though we are committed to salt reduction as part of our health strategy, we wouldn't do it in a way that compromises taste, quality, safety or the consumer experience.

Salt reduction is no longer a competitive issue; everyone in the food industry is facing the same hurdles when trying to

take more salt out of products. This was highlighted in an independent piece of work by Leatherhead commissioned by the FDF and BRC members. It outlined that there simply were not 'off the shelf' solutions available for reducing salt for some product categories by 2012. It has made three recommendations to help industry move ahead in this area:

- A call for the Department of Health to review advice of using potassium based replacements as there is a concern for patients suffering from kidney problems;
- The creation of minimum food safety requirements for salt replacement ingredient manufacturers, as this work has not always been done;
- Review the approach to novel technologies or ingredients.

We will continue to work on salt reduction as part of our product development process, but it also has to be said that there needs to be a focus on the balance of people's diets. If people are eating the wrong balance of foods, as is suggested by the obesity rise and National Diet and Nutrition Survey data, then they are probably also taking in too much salt. Any further reformulation must sit alongside an education and awareness programme. ■

If you would like to contribute as a panelist email:  
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**Our industry experts provide a compelling insight into the topical issues of the day**

## THE EXPERTS...



**KATHERINE JENNER**  
**CAMPAIGN DIRECTOR, CASH**

Having obtained a MSc in Public Health Nutrition at the University of Southampton, Katharine has been working at, and is now responsible for the running of, the salt reduction campaigns at CASH and WASH since 2007.



**BARBARA GALLANI**  
**DIRECTOR OF FOOD SAFETY AND SCIENCE, FDF**

Barbara is responsible for the development, implementation and promotion of FDF's policy with respect to scientific, technical and regulatory issues. Barbara is also responsible for FDF's work in the health and wellbeing field.



**CLAIRE HUGHES**  
**HEAD OF NUTRITION AND SCIENCE, M&S**

Prior to working at M&S Claire worked in retail, marketing and PR and started out as a research assistant in applied nutrition research. Claire's responsibilities at M&S include leading the nutrition and health strategy and engagement with external stakeholders.