

SALT REDUCTION: WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY



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Many health conditions associated with a high salt diet, in particular stroke, can be prevented by making good dietary choices throughout your life. This year's Salt Awareness Week, 'reducing salt; preventing stroke' will be focusing on raising consumer awareness about the health effects of too much salt and enabling people to have a choice about how much salt they eat. Access to the right information is key for this to work and there is an important role for healthcare professionals to play in reducing UK salt intake and preventing thousands of deaths every year.

Salt has received a lot of media attention in recent years because of its damaging effect on our health. It's hard to believe that such a familiar kitchen staple can be so bad for us, yet there is a wide body of evidence that demonstrates that chronic long-term over consumption of salt raises blood pressure and increases the risk of health problems such as stroke, heart attacks and heart failure, kidney disease, osteoporosis, stomach cancer and obesity.

About a third of all adults in the UK have high blood

pressure (defined as $\geq 140/90$ mmHg) and even more have raised blood pressure (1). One of the biggest health concerns relating to raised blood pressure, and therefore a high salt diet, is stroke, with approximately two thirds (62 percent) of all strokes occurring as a result of high blood pressure (2). Stroke is the third biggest killer in the

UK (1) with a greater disability impact compared to any other disease (3) leading to speech, memory, eating and mobility problems. This creates a huge burden for the NHS with a direct cost of approximately £3billion a year and indirect costs of as much £8billion (4).

There is a lot of work that needs to be done to reduce our salt intake; the benefits are clear and everyone can benefit from eating less salt. Salt intake has already started to fall in the UK with a one gram reduction between 2001 and 2008, from 9.5g to 8.6g person per day (5). Although modest, this reduction is thought to be saving 6,000 lives every year, including 2,600 from stroke alone (6).

THE PROBLEM...HIDDEN SALT

Seventy five percent of the salt we eat is hidden in the processed foods that we buy, often in unexpected places; in fact the biggest contributor of salt to our diet is bread which contributes a fifth (18 percent) of our salt intake (7). (See table 1).

Many people are unaware that the food industry is slowly reducing the amount of hidden salt in our food. For instance, did you know that many of the foods you buy in the supermarket now contain 20 to 50 percent less salt than they did 10 years ago (8)?

However, there is still a long way to go to reach six grams. Large variations in the salt level of similar products can still be found when you walk around the supermarket. For instance a survey of bread available in supermarkets (9) found a four fold difference in the salt level between similar packaged loaves (2.08g/100g compared to 0.58g/100g). Large differences are also seen in sausages, salads, soups, pies and pasta sauces and many other household products. Such large variations demonstrate that reductions can be made, but that not all manufacturers are making reductions as quickly as they could or should be to have the greatest benefit to our health.

We work with the food industry and Department of Health to make sure that reductions continue into the future and that all companies get involved. One of the major problems we are faced with is that the food industry has started to cite 'consumer acceptance' of lower salt products as a technical barrier to salt reduction. We know that once salt intake is reduced, taste buds adjust and become more sensitive so that people prefer food with less salt (10). However, as larger reductions are being made, there is an apparent need for increasing consumer awareness about the importance of salt reduction and an increasing need for consumers to show their support for having less salt put into their food.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Through Salt Awareness Week we hope to engage consumers in the salt reduction programme and empower people to make changes to their own diet. We need healthcare professionals to help get people thinking about their salt intake and provide advice on how to reduce it; whether it's by cutting back on those bacon butties, cooking more at home or checking labels when shopping for the family. Awareness increases the likelihood of action, so there is real need to increase the awareness about the health impacts that a chronic salt intake can have, as well as demonstrating how easy it is to eat less salt.

For more information about Salt Awareness Week or reducing salt intake, visit our website www.actiononsalt.org.uk or email: h.brinsden@qmul.ac.uk

Table 1 – Major contributors of salt to our diet (adapted from NDNS, 2011 (7))

Food Type	Percentage contribution to diet
Bread (all types)	18%
Bacon & Ham	7%
Pasta, rice and other miscellaneous cereals	6%
Chicken and turkey dishes (incl. coated)	6%
Vegetables (not raw) including vegetable dishes	6%
Savoury sauces, pickles, gravies and condiments	5%
Sausages	4%
Cheese	4%
Biscuits, Buns, Cakes, Pies, puddings, Pastries	4%
Beef, veal dishes	4%

For article references, please email: info@networkhealthgroup.co.uk

Hannah has a BSc in Nutrition & Food Science from The University of Reading. She is the lead researcher at Consensus Action on Salt & Health and has a particular interest in nutrition policy.