**Results from a survey in conjunction with Netmums**

In November 2007, over 2000 people took part in a survey to find out how much parents know about the complicated area of salt and children’s health. The survey was carried out in conjunction with Netmums, a parenting website.

One aspect of the survey was to find out if parents know why it is important to limit the amount of salt their children eat. Almost all those who took part (99.5%) knew that too much salt in the diet is linked with raised blood pressure. But only about a quarter (27.3%) were aware that it is also linked with stomach cancer, and fewer than one in five knew that too much salt can lead to osteoporosis (16%) or that too much salt in their child’s diet can aggravate the symptoms of asthma (19%). This reflects the focus of current public health campaigns and indicates that there should be more communication about the other negative health effects of eating too much salt.

When it came to how much salt children should be eating, the parents who took part in the survey were mostly aware that children should eat even less salt than adults, but there was still some confusion about the relationship between salt and sodium. The need for clear salt labelling is underlined by the fact that less than half those surveyed (48%) knew that 1g of sodium is equivalent to 2.5g of salt. 47% thought that 1g sodium is the same as 1g salt, so labels giving only sodium levels will lull these parents into a false sense of security as they try to find lower salt foods for their children. If a label gives only the sodium content, you need to multiply it by 2.5 to find the actual salt content.

For the record, it is recommended that babies under the age of 6 months eat no added salt, the limit for babies 7-12 months is 1g per day, toddlers 3 and under should have no more than 2g a day, 4-6 year olds 3g and 7-10 year-olds 5g per day. It is important to realise that these are maximum limits and not a daily requirement. No child actually needs more than about 0.7g of salt a day for their body to function correctly. Some labels have information for children presented as a GDA for 5-10 year olds of 4g a day. These are used by companies to simplify the maximum amounts children should be aiming for and you should remember that 5 and 6 year olds should be eating no more than 3g a day. Remember, traffic light labels are produced with adults in mind and an amber traffic light for an adult might be red for a child so check the salt per portion.

Not surprisingly, there was some confusion over which kinds of food contain the most salt, especially when it came to foods that are ostensibly sweet. In the survey, only 3% of the parents taking part knew that a blueberry muffin has more salt than two standard bags of crisps (1.1g salt in the muffin versus 0.5g in each bag of crisps). Only 10% knew that a serving of Rice Krispie-style breakfast cereal with milk contains more salt than a packet of ready salted crisps (0.7g versus 0.5g). Again, this underlines the need for clear labelling on all foods which contain salt, since a bowl of this cereal and a blueberry muffin between them contain almost a full day’s salt limit for a three year-old, before they eat anything ‘savoury’.

Consensus Action on Salt and Health were very pleased to find that 91% of the parents surveyed do not use salt when they are cooking for their children and 96% do not allow their children to add salt to their food at the table. This shows that the vast majority of parents are taking steps to limit their children’s salt intake. But parents also need to remember that cooking ingredients like stock cubes, soy sauce and instant gravy can be high in salt, as can table sauces like tomato ketchup and brown sauce. It is important to limit these foods as well.

Thank you to Netmums for their support of National Salt Awareness Week 2008 and to all of those who responded to the survey.

www.netmums.com