

## Salt – a major public health issue

The Food Standards Agency is launching a major public health campaign to tackle excessive salt consumption to help reduce the 170,000 deaths a year in England where high blood pressure is a cause or contributing factor<sup>1</sup>.

Scientific experts agree that high salt consumption increases the risk of high blood pressure, which, in turn, increases the risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease. Studies show that reducing salt in the diet can lower blood pressure within four weeks<sup>2</sup>.

The awareness campaign is part of an overall salt reduction strategy to improve public health, which includes:

- Working with industry to reduce the salt content of processed foods
- Improved labelling to assist informed choice by consumers
- Information geared to help consumers become aware of the risks of consuming too much salt

### Salt and health

In 2001, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) reviewed recent medical evidence on the impact of salt on health and made a series of recommendations. SACN's report "Salt and Health", published in 2003, recommended average salt intake in adults be reduced to 6g a day and for the first time set targets for children. The committee also noted that evidence for an association between high dietary salt intake and raised blood pressure had strengthened since the Committee on Medical Aspects of Health (COMA) first examined the link in 1994.

SACN concluded that a reduction in average salt intake would lower average blood pressure levels and confer significant public health benefits by contributing to a decrease in cardiovascular disease. Other lifestyle factors that contribute to high blood pressure include being overweight, alcohol consumption, high cholesterol and lack of physical activity.

The Board of the Food Standards Agency accepted the SACN recommendations and has set a target to reduce the average population salt intake to 6g a day by 2010.

**FACT** If you suffer from high blood pressure, you are three times more likely to develop heart disease or stroke and twice as likely to die from these conditions than people with normal blood pressure levels<sup>1</sup>.

### Getting the message out

The campaign will be high profile and involve messages on television, in the press and on posters. Further information on salt will be available on downloadable factsheets from the campaign website and via consumer leaflets.

Research commissioned by the Agency has shown that there is a low level of public understanding about the relationship between salt and health. Therefore the FSA campaign is based on raising awareness and understanding over time to encourage informed consumer choice.

The first phase of the campaign will run from September to November 2004. It aims to move consumers on from broad knowledge that consuming too much salt is bad for their health to a better awareness of why and how it can affect them. The main message is:

- Too much salt is bad for your heart

Secondary messages are:

- It causes high blood pressure leading to risk of heart disease and stroke
- The recommended average intake of salt is 6g a day (about a teaspoon)

This phase of the campaign will be comprehensively evaluated to help us develop any further activity.

## The role of industry

Individual action by consumers alone will not be sufficient to lower salt intake as the vast majority of salt is 'hidden' in processed food. Around 75% of salt intake comes from processed foods, including foods which do not appear to be high in salt such as breakfast cereals, biscuits, bread and tinned vegetables<sup>3</sup>.

The FSA and Health Departments are therefore working with industry to agree salt reduction targets across different food categories, with specific measurable commitments, capable of delivering the Agency's target of 6g of salt per person per day by 2010.

**FACT** In England high blood pressure, or hypertension, affects 37% of men and 34% of women. In Scotland the overall prevalence is 33% for men and 28% for women<sup>4</sup>.

While current reduction programmes vary by degree and scope between different companies and sectors, some progress towards reducing salt in key food categories has been made, but there is further scope for reductions to meet the Agency's target. Public sector caterers, such as local education authorities, the NHS and the prison service, are also being encouraged to use procurement to reduce salt in foods provided by suppliers.

The current reductions to salt levels by the food industry are being undertaken voluntarily but the FSA will be undertaking regular surveys to monitor the amount of salt in everyday foods in order to verify claimed reductions and to inform consumers. The FSA is also in discussion with the four UK Health Departments about arrangements to monitor salt intakes as consumers and industry take action to achieve reductions.

**FACT** The UK's current salt intake averages 9.5 grams per day. Adult men are eating 11g of salt a day while women are eating 8.1g a day<sup>3</sup>.

### Please contact us:

Further information about salt and the Food Standards Agency's public health campaign can be found on the dedicated website: [www.salt.gov.uk](http://www.salt.gov.uk)

If you have any further queries, please contact Veronica Martell in the FSA's Public Affairs team on 020 7276 8823, email: [veronica.martell@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:veronica.martell@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk).

**FACT** High blood pressure is a contributory factor for coronary heart disease, which results in around 100,000 deaths a year in England<sup>5</sup>. Other risk factors for coronary heart disease include smoking, high cholesterol, physical inactivity and obesity.

## Better labelling

Improved labelling is an important part of the overall salt reduction strategy. A range of activities relating to the provision of information about salt is currently underway, both within the Agency and at European level. These include EU proposals to:

- Include nutrition information on all pre-packed foods
- Encourage industry to use more consumer-friendly term 'salt' alongside 'sodium' in the nutritional information on labels
- Specify criteria for the use of claims such as 'low salt' and 'reduced salt' to ensure that claims do not undermine the public health message

In the meantime the Agency has issued advice on use of 'low salt' and 'reduced salt' claims and is encouraging industry to provide 'salt' as well as 'sodium' levels in the nutritional information on labels. Many of the major supermarkets currently label salt levels in own brand products and increasingly major manufacturing companies are following suit with their branded products.

## Support the campaign

The public awareness campaign has the support of a wide range of industry, public health and consumer stakeholders who will be re-inforcing the key campaign messages. Changes in diet will take time. The FSA is confident that by continuing to work closely with UK Health Departments and a wide range of stakeholders it will make a significant impact on this important public health issue.

<sup>1</sup> The Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Health 2001

<sup>2</sup> DASH sodium trial 2001

<sup>3</sup> National Diet and Nutrition Survey of adults aged 19-64 years, published by the Food Standards Agency

<sup>4</sup> There are no comparable figures available for Wales and Northern Ireland. Figures for England from Health Survey for England 2002. Figures for Scotland

from Scottish Health Survey 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, Peto and Rayner, 'Coronary Heart Disease Statistics', 2004 edition, British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group, Department of Public Health, University of Oxford

<sup>6</sup> National Diet and Nutrition Survey of Adults 19-64, vol3, 2003