

# FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

March 2006

## Improving public health – salt reduction

### Key Points

- Eating too much salt is bad for your heart, and is a significant factor in developing high blood pressure, which can triple the risk of heart disease and stroke.
- Dietary recommendations are that adults should eat no more than 6g of salt per day. Research suggests that reducing salt intakes to this level should result in a 13% fall in stroke and a 10% decrease in coronary heart disease.
- In the UK, at least 26 million people are eating too much salt and processed foods contribute around 75% of the salt in our diets. Clearly, it is important for public health that salt intakes are reduced.
- The FSA has developed a salt reduction strategy. This involves two major strands of activity: work with industry to reduce the salt content of processed foods, and an ongoing campaign to promote public awareness about why high intakes of salt are bad for health, and what consumers can do to reduce their salt intake.
- The public awareness campaign has successfully used a national advertising campaign and supporting work with key consumer groups – resulting in a 45% increase in those claiming to have reduced salt intakes.
- On March 21<sup>st</sup> the FSA published voluntary targets for the food industry covering 85 categories of processed food. These targets are the next step towards helping reduce average salt intakes in the UK to 6g a day. They will be reviewed in 2008 to identify what further action may be necessary. The targets will have a real impact on consumers' intakes and guide manufacturers on the level of salt reductions that are needed to maintain progress towards the 6g maximum intake.
- The targets cover those foods that contribute most salt in the diet including staple foods such as bread, bacon, breakfast cereal and cheese, and a wide range of convenience foods. The targets were developed after consulting over 250 organisations and take account of technical and safety considerations. However, the final targets are challenging to industry but realistic. A summary of the consultation responses are available on our website: [www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/salt/devsalttargets](http://www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/salt/devsalttargets).
- Consumers and caterers need to take action by reducing the amount of salt added to food in cooking and at the table, and by choosing products with lower salt levels.
- The FSA will be monitoring dietary intakes, and will be encouraging manufacturers and retailers to continue their efforts, and more companies to take action.
- Industry progress against the targets will be monitored through a self-reporting scheme, which is in development.

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## **Working with industry**

The FSA and Department of Health have been working with the food industry to reduce the amount of salt present in a wide range of foods. The aim is to reduce consumers' average daily salt intake from 9.5g to 6g by 2010. Research suggests that this would result in a 13% fall in stroke and a 10% decrease in coronary heart disease.

The majority (around 75%) of the salt we consume comes from processed foods. Although the FSA is encouraging consumers not to add salt at the table or during cooking, these changes alone would not be sufficient to reduce the population's average salt intake to recommended levels. A programme of work with the food industry was initiated in 2003 to encourage voluntary reductions in the amount of salt added to processed foods. This has produced steady progress including:

- The Association of Cereal Food Manufacturers has reduced the levels of salt in breakfast cereals by 33% since 1998
- The Federation of Bakers has cut the amount in pre-packed sliced bread by up to 30%
- Heinz has lowered its salt levels by between 11 and 18%
- Kraft has lowered the salt in its cheese spreads and snack products by around a third
- Members of the Food and Drink Federation have sought to reduce the salt in soups and sauces by 30%
- Major retailers, including ASDA, Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury, Tesco and Waitrose have all made significant progress with salt reduction

## **Development of Targets**

Further reductions are needed to ensure that progress continues to be made towards the 6g maximum intake target. To help guide the food industry, the FSA has developed salt reduction targets covering a wide range of categories of food. These targets were the subject of a public consultation in August 2005.

Responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders, including retailers, manufacturers, caterers and trade associations, consumer organisations, enforcement bodies, health-related organisations, academics and local authorities. Following this consultation, the FSA met with a range of stakeholders to discuss concerns raised and to collect more data before finalising the targets. The FSA has set the targets at challenging levels while taking into account food safety and technical issues.

## **Next steps**

The final salt reduction targets were published on 21 March, for compliance by 2010. The FSA is now working to develop a self-reporting framework for industry in order to monitor progress towards these targets.

## **How tough are the targets?**

Some commentators have suggested that the FSA has bowed to industry pressure to relax the salt reduction targets, which in turn may stop us from achieving the 6g public health target. As an independent body, we have consulted over 250 different organisations, including a wide range of consumer groups, public health bodies and independent food technologists in developing the final targets. As makers of our food, the food industry has also been consulted.

The FSA has set realistic but challenging targets. The FSA remains committed to reducing consumers average intakes to not more than 6g per day, and these targets are the next step towards this goal. In 2008, independent assessments of the potential for reduction and ongoing research will be reviewed, together with the results of urinary monitoring (one

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way of assessing salt intake levels). The FSA will consider, in consultation with stakeholders, what further work is necessary to achieve the 6g maximum average population intake.

Some commentators have called for the introduction of legislation in this area. The FSA believes these calls for legislation are unwarranted, given the success of the FSA's voluntary measures, so far. The salt reduction targets will continue to build on these achievements.

## Key questions about the final targets

### ❖ Why set targets?

Voluntary targets have been developed to guide industry on the types of foods in which reductions are required and the levels of reductions that are needed to help consumers to reduce the amount of salt they consume from processed foods. As around 75% of all salt we eat comes from processed foods, the targets have been set for a wide range of processed foods (85 categories in total). Targets will also enable monitoring of progress towards public health goals.

### ❖ What foods are included in the final targets?

The targets cover a wide range of food categories that contribute most to salt intakes and include everyday foods such as meat products (particularly bacon and ham), cereal products (bread and breakfast cereals), and cheese. They also cover convenience foods (ready meals, pizza, sandwiches etc.) and savoury snacks, and cakes and pastries. Sauces and condiments are included because although they may be used in small amounts they can contain relatively high levels of salt.

### ❖ Do the FSA's salt targets go far enough?

The targets set are challenging, achievable and represent a realistic rate of reduction, which will have a real impact on consumers' intakes. We will review the targets in 2008, to ensure that progress continues to be made towards achieving the 6g target average salt intake.

### ❖ How will you monitor progress towards the salt targets?

The FSA is developing a 'self-reporting framework' and consulted on this as part of the consultation. Most respondents were positive about the idea of industry self-reporting and discussions will commence shortly on the format that this will take.

In addition to self-reporting, the FSA will be monitoring progress in other ways including obtaining data on the levels of salt in a selection of processed foods so that changes made can be verified. We will also be tracking changes in salt intakes in the UK population via urinary sodium testing. This will help us to monitor progress.

### ❖ What about salt levels in food prepared by restaurants and canteens?

Targets have been set specifically for 'take-away' meat, fish, vegetable and potato based dishes. The targets for all food categories provide guidance to catering suppliers of restaurants and canteens. Separately the FSA is also developing guidance for businesses in the catering sector to help reduce levels of salt and some other key nutrients e.g. fat and saturated fat, for which consumer dietary intakes exceed recommended levels.

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❖ How will this empower consumers to further reduce their salt intakes?

Through its public awareness campaign, the FSA is encouraging consumers to use food labels to select lower salt products, and not to add salt to their food either during cooking or at the table.

Improved labelling is an important part of the overall salt reduction strategy. The FSA has recently recommended use of front of pack signpost labelling to help consumers make informed choices about their diet. The approach recommended by the FSA would enable consumers to see at a glance whether levels of salt in a product, are high, medium or low. Please see separate FSA briefing 'Front of Pack Food Labelling, March 2006'.

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## **Please contact us**

Further information on the salt campaign can be found on the dedicated website, [www.salt.gov.uk](http://www.salt.gov.uk)

Should you have any other queries, please contact Scott Royal, in the FSA Public Affairs department, on 020 7276 8839, or [scott.royal@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:scott.royal@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk)