

## Improving public health – salt reduction

With the aim of reducing the public's average daily salt intake from 9.5g to 6g by 2010, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) is set to launch the second phase of its public awareness campaign, to encourage people to eat no more than 6g of salt a day<sup>1</sup>.

### Key Points

- The overall salt reduction strategy is comprised of two strands: the public awareness campaign targeting consumers, reinforced by ongoing work with industry to reduce the salt content of processed foods
- Phase One of the campaign, launched in Sept 2004, increased awareness of the risks of excessive salt consumption, resulting in an almost 50% increase in the number of people claiming to check food labels for salt content<sup>2</sup>
- Phase Two, to be launched in Oct 2005, is seeking to change behaviour by reinforcing the 6g daily intake recommendation
- An increasing number of food companies have provided long-term commitments to salt reduction
- The 6g daily target was recommended by the independent Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition following a comprehensive review of the scientific evidence

### Phase Two – the messages

FSA research has indicated that consumers want further information on daily salt intake targets and how they might control their consumption. The next phase of the campaign is designed to help consumers make informed choices and promote behavioural change. The messages are:

“You should eat no more than 6g of salt a day”  
and  
“Always check the food labels for salt content”

As with the first phase, television will be the main advertising medium, supported by press work and posters throughout the main campaign period of October and November 2005. Further information on salt and health will also be available from the dedicated website, [www.salt.gov.uk](http://www.salt.gov.uk), consumer leaflets, and a special DVD will be available on request.

### Measuring success

As with all FSA campaigns, each stage will be evaluated to inform all future activity, with awareness

and understanding of the messages assessed before, during and after the main advertising activity.

Overall progress towards the 6g daily intake target is tracked through health surveys used to analyse changes in consumption. Work is underway to establish additional monitoring mechanisms in the devolved administrations.

### The science behind 6g

Scientific experts agree that excessive salt consumption increases the risk of high blood pressure which, in turn, increases the chances of both cardiovascular disease and stroke. Indeed, high blood pressure is a cause or contributory factor in 170,000 deaths in England alone every year.

In its 2003 report, “Salt and Health”, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) concluded that reducing the population's average salt intake would lower average blood pressure levels, and therefore result in significant public health benefits by contributing to a reduction in cardiovascular disease.

SACN recommended that the average population intake be reduced to 6g a day for adults, while specific targets were also set for children.

Research suggests that reducing salt intake from 9.5g to 6g per day should result in a 13% fall in stroke and a 10% decrease in coronary heart disease<sup>3</sup>. Other lifestyle factors, such as reducing alcohol consumption and increasing physical exercise, will also have a positive effect.

## Working with industry

As approximately 75% of the salt we consume is added during the manufacture of processed foods, individual action by consumers alone will not be sufficient to reduce the population's average salt intake.

In addition to the public awareness campaign, therefore, the FSA and Department of Health have been jointly working with the food industry to reduce the amount of salt present in a wide range of foods.

The Agency welcomes the positive engagement from industry and since February 2004:

- More than 50 written commitments to salt reduction work have been received from a range of organisations, across all sectors of the food industry, and are published on the FSA/DoH websites ([www.food.gov.uk/healthierating/salt/saltprogressstatement](http://www.food.gov.uk/healthierating/salt/saltprogressstatement))
- FSA is currently consulting on salt content targets for key product categories, and will be publishing agreed targets by the end of the year, to provide food businesses with benchmarks against which they can demonstrate progress
- FSA is currently further developing its strategy for working towards salt reduction with the catering sector, although significant progress has been made by several leading companies

Prior to these developments, some manufacturers and retailers had already begun work to reduce salt levels in their products, with notable progress including:

- The Food and Drink Federation's *Project Neptune* scheme to reduce salt levels of both soups and sauces by 30% between 2003 and 2005
- An average 13% reduction in the levels of sodium in bread between 1998 and 2001, with a further 5% reduction in 2004
- A 22% decrease in salt levels of branded breakfast cereals between 1998 and 2003

The overall salt reduction strategy, meanwhile, combining public awareness with work involving

industry, is being used as a model for working on other aspects of diet.

The UK approach is also likely to be applied elsewhere in the EU, after it was positively received by the EC Commission and members of the Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, following a presentation at a UK Presidency event in London, in September 2005.

## Partnerships

Phase Two of the campaign has the backing of a wide range of organisations. Statements of support have already been received from more than 20 public health bodies, consumer groups and industry organisations.

The Agency is also currently working closely with a range of organisations to help deliver the campaign messages to specific population groups. The campaign partners include:

Age Concern  
British Dietetic Association  
British Heart Foundation  
Blood Pressure Association  
Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH)  
National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI)  
Stroke Association

## Labelling improvements

Improved labelling is an important part of the overall salt reduction strategy and the Agency is involved in a series of activities to help consumers make informed choices about their diet:

- Encouraging industry to use the term "salt", rather than "sodium", in the nutritional information on labels – a move many of the major retailers and manufacturers have embraced
- Advising food retailers and manufacturers on the use of terms such as "low salt" and "reduced salt" on packaging
- Developing a front-of-pack "signposting" scheme, providing at-a-glance information about the nutritional content of foods, to be launched later in the year, (as supported by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee in its report on Food Information last year)
- Calling for greater clarity in nutrition labelling – the legislation, agreed at EU level, is likely to be reviewed in 2006

**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 James Adler, in the FSA Public Affairs department, on 020 7276 8843, or [James.Adler@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:James.Adler@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, *Salt and Health*, London, TSO, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Salt campaign tracker research commissioned by COI Communications, (August 2004 to May 2005)

<sup>3</sup> Medical Research Council Human Nutrition Research, 2005, *Why 6g? A summary of the scientific evidence for the salt intake target*, Cambridge