

Concurrent Session 10: AWASH – Salt, the hidden dietary guidelines

Removing salt from the Australian food supply – the success of the Heart Foundation Tick Program

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Background – The National Heart Foundation of Australia has advocated that Australians eat less salt for more than forty years. A recent review by the Heart Foundation to determine whether a causal association exists between a decrease in dietary sodium intake and CVD risk reduction confirms that there is good evidence that reducing dietary sodium intake will lower blood pressure (1). Much of the salt consumed by Australians is from the food supply rather than the salt shaker. The Heart Foundation's Tick Program has been profiling healthier food choices for 17 years. By challenging manufacturers to meet tough nutrition standards, the Tick Program aims to improve the food supply for ultimate public health gains, while helping consumers with their choices at point-of-sale. The Heart Foundation sets strict standards for sodium across categories representing the foods Australians consume most often and tracks the impact of these benchmarks.

Objective – To outline the impact of the Heart Foundation's Tick Program on reducing the salt intake of Australians by improving the food supply.

Outcomes – The Tick Program sets tough sodium criterion for 36 its 54 categories. A recent review of the Tick criteria has seen further sodium reductions in 10 categories. Sodium reduction is a challenge for the industry as it has a critical role in consumer's taste acceptance, texture, pathogen inhibition and flavour. There are limits in the reduction of sodium that can be achieved in some categories and a requirement to lower sodium levels incrementally to achieve desired targets. There are several examples of how the Tick Program's sodium benchmarks have driven formulations and innovations towards healthier offerings for consumers. For example, 235 tonnes of sodium were removed annually from the food supply by a manufacturer reformulating 12 cereals using the Tick criterion as a target (2). On average luncheon meats have a sodium content of 1000-1500mg/100g. A range of Tick approved luncheon meats have been developed with 50% of the sodium content of comparable products. On average Australians eat 240 million meat pies each year. Tick meat pies contain 50% less sodium than the average pie, so switching to a Tick alternative would save Australians 111 tonnes of sodium each year. Bread is a significant contributor of sodium to the Australian diet. The Tick Program is incrementally reducing the sodium level from 450mg to 400mg over a two year period in partnership with the bread industry. A manufacturer of pasta sauces has achieved a 25% reduction in the salt content of its sauces over a two year period using the Tick's benchmarks.

Conclusions- The Heart Foundation Tick Program offers Australians a real solution to lower the salt content of the foods they eat most often. The Tick is a simple, independent, easy to spot and trusted guide that shoppers are using to identify healthier choices when faced with aisles of food choices and numerous nutrition claims. For the food industry, the Tick is defining healthier choices, setting realistic benchmarks and providing them with the incentive to modify their products. In doing so, the Tick Program is removing thousands of tonnes of sodium from the Australian food supply each year thereby improving the health of the population.

References

1. National Heart Foundation of Australia. A review of the relationship between dietary electrolytes and cardiovascular disease. 2005: NHFA Review. Available on NHFA website (www.heartfoundation.com.au) December 2006.
2. Williams P, McMahon A, Boustead R. A case study of sodium reduction in breakfast cereals and the impact of the Pick the Tick food information program in Australia. *Health Promotion International* 2003; 18:51-56.