

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

An industry response to salt reduction

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Background – Data are limited but it is estimated that Australians currently consume in the order of 150mmol sodium (9.0g salt) per day [1] compared to the Suggested Dietary Target of 70mmol sodium (4.0g salt) per day [2]. 75% of salt in the Western diet is likely to come from processed foods such as breads, cereals and ready prepared foods [3]. By reducing the sodium content of these foods, food manufacturers can remove significant volumes of sodium from the food supply with potentially significant benefits for population blood pressure levels.

Objective – To investigate the feasibility of sodium reduction across a range of > 130 processed savoury food products with an average sodium content of 800mg/100g.

Design – Product specific benchmarks for sodium were derived from a combination of international and national dietary recommendations and existing signposting systems such as the National Heart Foundation Tick program. These benchmarks were used to reformulate existing products and develop new products and were reviewed after 3 years.

Outcomes – Between 2001 and 2004, there was an average sodium reduction of 25% across the range of these products resulting in an estimated removal of 36 tonnes of sodium from the Australian food supply. Results for the period 2004-2006 are being currently being analysed. Initial large sodium reductions were relatively easy to achieve by a combination of removal of added salt and addition of potassium chloride. Subsequent reductions were smaller and limited by a range of factors including consumer acceptance, lack of acceptable sodium substitutes and the need for lower sodium ingredients.

Conclusion – Sodium remains a challenging nutrient to reduce in the food supply. Reductions made tend to be small and gradual to allow for consumer taste adaptation. In addition, consumer awareness of the adverse health effects of sodium is low and strong demand for more ‘natural products’ appears to favour addition of salt in place of ‘unnatural’ sodium substitutes to foods. However, the development of novel sodium substitutes and lower sodium ingredients offers some promise for achieving greater sodium reductions in the future. In addition, research into taste perception is an emerging area of science which may offer a different approach to sodium reduction. The food industry does have a responsibility to reduce the sodium content of processed foods. However, it is the responsibility of all sectors to work together to educate the public and raise awareness about the importance of sodium reduction as well as agree on best approaches to achieve this in practice. Only then can significant and sustainable reductions in sodium in the food supply be achieved.

References

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3. James WPT, Ralph A, Sanchez-Castillo CP. The dominance of salt in manufactured food in the sodium intake of affluent societies. *Lancet* 1987;i;426-428