

Concurrent Session 13: Salt and Cardiovascular Disease

Consumer awareness and behaviour related to salt consumption in Australia: more needs to be done

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Background – Australian adults and children consume too much salt with adverse consequences for their health. The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) aims to reduce average adult salt consumption to 6 g per day within five years and to achieve significant reductions in childhood intakes over the same time period. Annual consumer surveys are being done to establish knowledge and practices related to dietary salt.

Objective – The primary aim of these analyses was to collect information about adult consumer knowledge and behaviour and to assess year on year changes. A secondary aim was to collect information about parents' knowledge and behaviour related to salt and their children's health.

Design – Two surveys were conducted in March 2007/08. There were 1084 participants (52% F) in 2007 and 1016 (52% F) in 2008. Results from the surveys were summarised and compared.

Outcomes – Whilst ~75% claimed to check food content labels for sodium at least some of the time, <50% understood the relationship between salt and sodium. Adult awareness and behaviour in relation to salt did not change over the one year period. Over half of parents (53%) were concerned about salt in children's food and 86% knew that salt could have harmful effects on children's health.

Conclusion – Despite being aware of the adverse health effects of salt, most consumers are taking little action to reduce salt intakes. A government-led social marketing campaign and clearer labelling appears to have much to offer to consumers.

Monitoring salt reduction in processed foods in Australia

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Background – Australians are currently consuming around 9g of salt each day, well above the recommended 6 g per day maximum. The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) seeks to improve the health of the Australian population by achieving a gradual reduction in dietary salt intakes. AWASH is working with the food industry to reduce the sodium content of packaged foods by an average 25% over the next five years. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) in the UK is a world leader in salt reduction and has set salt targets for various processed food products. There are currently no such targets for the Australian food industry.

Objective – To determine the extent to which processed foods on Australian supermarket shelves meet acceptable sodium levels (based on UK FSA targets).

Design – The sodium content of foods contributing substantial amounts of salt to the Australian diet was collected. The mean and range of sodium (in mg/100g) was assessed for each food category and the percentage of products meeting acceptable sodium targets was calculated.

Outcomes – Food categories with less than 50% of products meeting sodium targets included bread, processed meat, baked beans, canned vegetables and table sauces. Less than 5% of sausages and beef burgers met acceptable levels. Food categories with more than 50% of products meeting targets included canned fish, butter/margarine, savoury biscuits and some breakfast cereals.

Conclusion – Although a number of food companies in Australia have made progress in salt reduction, these results show there is still work to be done. Government should lead negotiations on setting maximum salt targets for different food products.