

A Push to Limit Salt Intake and Curb Cardiovascular Disease

World Salt Awareness Week Runs from the 2nd - 8th February 2009...

When it comes to adding extra flavour to foods, you hear common phrases like, “may I have the salt please”, or “this food requires more salt”. Do we actually need all this extra salt in our diet? Health experts emphatically say no! The reason for this is that excessive intakes of salt predisposes one to developing high blood pressure, a known risk factor for cardiovascular disease (CVD). Professor of cardiovascular medicine and chairman of WASH (World Action on Salt and Health) group, Graham MacGregor, says, “CVD is the leading cause of death and disability worldwide, and it has been estimated that if we just reduce our salt intake by a few grams per day, we can all reduce our risk of CVD”. Most people consume about 10-15g (2-3 teaspoons) salt per day, more than twice the recommended limit of 5g per day (1 teaspoon).

WASH is a global group that aims to reduce salt intakes worldwide by persuading food companies to reduce the salt content of their food products and at a government level, to have policies on salt reduction in place. Global health experts from 28 countries are joining hands this week to help increase awareness and urge people to eat less salt! Activities planned around the world include, surveys of the salt content of restaurant meals, speaking to chefs and government, increasing awareness amongst consumers by having posters and providing them with leaflets of information. Individuals need to take the onus upon themselves to change their dietary habits in the interest of improving their health while the food industry should ensure that their products contain less salt, thus allowing the consumer access to healthier products, says, Shân Biesmon-Simons, Registered Dietician and Director for Nutrition & Education at The Heart & Stroke Foundation SA.

Apart from just adding salt to your food, many products contain hidden salt e.g. processed meats & cheeses, meat extracts, stock cubes and powders, salted snacks, cheese spreads, canned foods and regular breads. It seems to be a common ingredient in products as it is an inexpensive way of enhancing the flavour, texture and shelf-life of foods. This increased usage and availability of high salt foods has sparked global interest in urging the public to consume less added salt and salt laden foods.

How can I reduce salt in my diet?

- Cut back on the amount you use in cooking and use alternatives like pepper, garlic, ginger, lemon juice, curry powders, chillies and herbs to enhance the flavour of your food.
- Avoid putting the salt shaker on the table when eating.
- Purchase fresh or frozen products, as tinned products can contain plenty of salt.
- When choosing canned products, opt for the ones that state “no added salt” on the label or tinned in water or tomato sauce.
- When eating out, asked for your meals to be prepared without salt.
- The words sodium, mono-sodium glutamate and sodium bicarbonate are indicative that the product contains hidden salt. Examples of these include, packet soups, stock cubes, soya sauce, smoked foods, chips, cheesy biscuits, salted butter, some commercial salad dressings, salted nuts and some convenience and instant meals.
- Understanding food labels can be valuable. A low sodium product should contain 120mg sodium per 100g or less, while very low sodium products have 40mg sodium per 100g or less.
- Choose Heart Mark approved products as these are lower in sodium as well as saturated fat, cholesterol, added sugar and higher in fibre (where applicable).

What about salt substitutes?

- Low sodium salts are available but do contain plenty of potassium. It's use should be avoided by those who are diabetic, have kidney disease or existing heart disease as potassium excretion might be impaired in these groups of people. It is best to seek medical advice from the doctor before consuming these salt substitutes.
- Vegetable salts are also not advisable as these are also generally high in salt.
- It is best to wean yourself off salty foods and allow yourself to adapt to alternative flavours.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA recommends that people should aim to consume a diet low in sodium, coupled with general healthy eating principles and increased physical activity.

Written by Ayesha Seedat, Registered Dietician, The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA.

For more information or free nutritional advice from Registered Dietitians, call the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or visit our website www.heartfoundation.co.za