

# Campaign underlines hazards of high salt intake

With 6.3 million people living with high blood pressure, South Africa has one of the highest rates of hypertension worldwide, which is why the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa is launching a new lobby group this week to alert South Africans to the fact that too much salt could be killing them.

Statistics show that about 130 heart attacks and 240 strokes occur daily in South Africa. This means that 10 people will suffer a stroke and five people will have a heart attack every hour. According to the Foundation, 80% of these cardiovascular diseases could be prevented through modified behaviour, such as reducing salt.

## Salt Watch

This is the central message of the new group: Salt Watch. Led by the Foundation and including experts in the field of salt reduction, the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA), the Nutrition Society of South Africa (NNSA) and the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa, the group is working in association with World Action on Salt and Health (WASH). It is set to launch a major national awareness campaign to help reduce population salt intake.

Its work will complement moves by government to legislate a reduction in salt in South African food. The World Health Organisation recommends that adults eat less than 5g of salt (a teaspoon) a day, but in South Africa some experts put the average salt intake by South Africans as high as 40g of salt a day.

"The problem is that up to 60% of this salt is hidden in products and consumed by people probably unaware of the high salt content in their food," says Dr Vash Mungal-Singh, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA.

This has prompted the South African Department of Health to investigate taking a legislative route towards lowering salt content in SA foods. Internationally, the model followed by most countries has been based on voluntary reduction. However, during discussions with the South African food industry, almost half of stakeholders revealed that they would prefer salt regulation to be mandatory, in order to level the playing field and ensure no one company is disadvantaged.

Salt reduction initiatives have been very successful in the UK, France, Finland and the US and have resulted in a drop in salt levels in some processed foods, such as bread. According to the proposed draft legislation, South Africa will give food manufacturers until June 2016 to comply with the first set of salt guidelines. Different products have been given different periods, allowing producers to adapt their strategies for reducing sodium - the dangerous component in salt - in their products.

## Pioneering step

Meanwhile South Africa has been hailed internationally for taking such concrete steps for reducing salt or sodium consumption. Professor Graham Macgregor, chairman of the World Action on Salt and Health (WASH) described South Africa as taking a "pioneering" role in salt reduction programmes.

"Achieving a long and healthy life, free from disease, is a right not just for South Africans but for everybody in the world. It is time that Western governments stopped being pressurised by their tobacco and food industry and follow South Africa's example by setting specific targets for reducing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including salt reduction to less than 5g a day, particularly in developing countries where the major burden of NCDs lies," said Professor Macgregor.

However, as the health department is aware, food regulation is not enough to wean South Africans off salt. "Educating the public is crucial to the success of the salt reduction programme," comments Dr Mungal-Singh.

## **Public warnings**

"The link between salt and high blood pressure is well-documented and accepted as medical fact. But what is less widely known, is that South African foods are laden with salt - or sodium," says Dr Mungal-Singh.

Internationally accepted guidelines state that any food with more than 600 mg of sodium per 100g can be considered unhealthy. In South Africa, many products exceed this limit. The biggest culprit is bread, followed closely by margarine, butter spreads, stock cubes, soup powders, breakfast cereals and savoury snacks. However, consumers are often surprised to find high sodium content in foods that are sweet or not salty at all.

Another concern is that South Africans rate high on the list of discretionary salt use - ie the amount of salt they add to food. In most Westernised countries, discretionary use is small - only about 15% but in South Africa, up to 40% of salt is added by individuals to their food, says Professor Krisela Steyn, associate director of the Chronic Diseases Initiative in Africa (CDIA) based at UCT. This shows the lack of awareness of the dangers that salt poses to health, especially those who suffer from high blood pressure, says Dr Mungal-Singh. "The public need to be warned of the risks."

Professor Melvyn Freeman of the Department of Health adds, "Part of industry's objection (to the proposed legislation) has been the suggestion that once salt in processed foods is reduced, people will make up lost flavour with discretionary salt, so we need an education campaign to follow the legislation."

## **Bread: the black sheep**

"This is why programmes will be launched across South Africa to warn the public on the dangers of high salt consumption and encourage them to cut down on salt," says Dr Mungal-Singh.

"The number one black sheep is bread - both locally and internationally. It has been estimated that by reducing the sodium content of bread by 50%, along with other reductions, salt intake will be decreased by 0.085g a day, resulting in 7 400 fewer deaths due to cardiovascular disease annually in South Africa.

"For consumers, the best way to go about cutting down on salt is to begin by reading labels carefully and to become aware of salt, tailoring shopping habits to lower salt content foods. The aim should be to reduce salt slowly and to look out for high-salt foods and buy alternatives instead. In time the body will adjust and eating a healthy low-salt diet will become much less of a chore - and will actually become a pleasure instead.

"It is time for people to realise that salt is killing South Africans and it is time to take action," she concludes.