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New Dietary Guidelines

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) have for some time been revising the dietary guidelines for Australians. The purpose of the guidelines are to help promote health and wellbeing; reduce the risk of diet-related conditions, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and obesity; and reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancers.

The draft dietary guidelines (which will be supported by other materials and will be finalised after further consultation) are:

For optimum health and wellbeing it is recommended that Australians drink water and enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from the following groups every day:

- *plenty of vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans;*
- *fruit;*
- *grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain;*
- *lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans;*
- *milk, yogurt, cheese and/or their alternatives, mostly reduced fat.*

It is also important to:

- *Achieve and maintain a healthy weight: be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious foods and drinks to meet your energy needs.*
- *Limit intake of foods and drinks containing: saturated and trans fats; added salt; added sugars; and alcohol.*
- *Encourage and support breastfeeding.*
- *Care for your food; prepare and store it safely.*

People who follow a low salt diet will know very well that the low salt food they eat will have no more than 120 mg sodium/100g food – and the sodium content is listed on all packaged food in Australia. It's great to have a specific guideline so we know how to limit intake of food and drinks containing added salt.

National programs to lower population dietary salt intake

Did you know that many countries have programs that aim to lower the mean dietary salt intake of their populations?

This is in recognition of the very large health benefits populations can achieve by the simple dietary strategy of eating less salt – and in recognition of the difficulty of doing this when a large proportion of processed or packaged food contains too much salt.

To start with Australian programs:

The Food and Health Dialogue:

This is an Australian government program.

The Food and Health Dialogue is chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing, and comprises representatives from the Australian Food and Grocery Council, the National Heart Foundation, the Public Health Association of Australia, Woolworths, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, the Quick Service Restaurant Forum and state/territory government.

It began in 2009, and its primary activity is a food reformulation program to reduce risk-associated nutrients, including saturated fat, sugar, salt and energy and increase beneficial components such as fibre, wholegrain, fruits and vegetables, across a range of commonly consumed foods.

The dialogue works by meeting with food manufacturers and exploring possibilities for reducing the amount of harmful

nutrients in food and increasing beneficial components. It is a collaborative program – changes happen by agreement, and all parties contribute to addressing the issues raised.

All of the food categories reviewed to date (bread, breakfast cereal, simmer sauces and the processed meats) include action to reduce sodium content for products at the higher end. But be warned! Each of the food categories has an average sodium content that is much higher than what meets the definition of a low salt food – salt skippers still need to carefully choose within these categories to find foods that they like to eat and that are lower than 120mg/100g sodium.

The fact that substantial reductions in the sodium content of popular food categories can be made, and they remain much higher in salt than low salt foods gives you an idea of just how much the Australian population needs to reduce its salt intake!

The biggest benefit of the program is that it will benefit everybody and even people who pay no attention to their salt intake are likely to benefit from a lower salt intake in time.

Especially because there are at least 2 other programs active in Australia!

The Tick Program:

Run by the Heart Foundation, the Tick program has had its 20th birthday. It is a certification program – companies pay a license fee to the program and providing the food product meets the nutritional criteria developed by the Heart Foundation, the food can display the Tick symbol on packaging or in marketing.

National salt reduction programs

The Tick symbol can be trusted to mean that the food has met nutritional criteria to mean that it is better for you than other foods in the same category – so an ice cream carrying the Tick symbol means that it has less fat than the average of other ice creams.

The Tick symbol often includes criteria related to sodium – but foods carrying the Tick often have sodium levels higher than low salt foods. The Tick provides assurance of ‘better than most’ in the category, but not necessarily the level that you demand as a salt conscious citizen. When in doubt, check the label for the Tick, and check the back of the packet for a sodium content that is 120 mg/100g or less.

If you want to be serious, go by the numbers ... don't settle for half-measures.

Drop the Salt!

This campaign is run by the Australian division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) – and a nice group of people they are.

The campaign also seeks to collaborate with food companies in setting new and progressively lower targets for sodium content of foods. They also use a media strategy to highlight the high intake of salt by Australians and the health benefits to be gained from significantly lowering sodium intake. Raising the profile of dietary sodium reduction is aimed at those people who don't know very much about the issue – and that's a lot of people! When you think about the size of the health benefit that can be returned from focussing on one simple aspect of food intake, it is amazing that so many people have only a vague idea of what they should do (and so many more don't care!).

And I do understand there are trade-offs between enjoying food you've always loved and doing what's good for your health – but on an investment-return basis, it's a pretty good deal, isn't it? [Reader feedback on this is most welcome!]

AWASH also do a pretty good job of monitoring what Australians are actually doing in regards to dietary salt intake – they monitor the sodium content of foods declared on food packaging, and this year they have been measuring individual sodium intake through collecting urinary sodium output in carefully selected groups of people (you didn't think all that excess sodium stays in the body, did you?)

What about other countries?

The leader is possibly the United Kingdom – and they had a lot of work to do. One of their government agencies ran a very successful campaign to lower population dietary intake of salt - and they are well on their way to their target of 6 grams per day – from an average intake of 9.5 grams per day!

The campaign included lowering the salt content of foods available in supermarkets, front-of-packet traffic light labelling of foods high in salt and a public information campaign about the health dangers of a high salt intake (featuring Sid the Slug). The campaign has been a great success with food industry, government and non-government organisations contributing to the effort.

The success that the UK has seen has convinced other governments to launch similar programs.

In the United States, the New York City Health Department has launched a National initiative to lower salt in the food supply. Again they have taken the strategy of providing food industry with achievable targets for salt content of different food categories and challenged them to produce food that meets it. Support from the mayor of New York City means that it isn't seen as just another health issue – this makes sense for everybody.

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We are on the Web at
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Salt Skip News will
continue to be distributed
in hard copy in The BP
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National salt reduction

Canada has also recently developed a 'Sodium Reduction Strategy for Canada' – again using the strategies that worked so well in the United Kingdom.

Less developed countries are also implementing dietary salt reduction strategies – and preventive health programs makes even more sense when many people can't afford the health services that are available.

These programs are not for salt-skippers, of course. Salt skippers are already a long, long way ahead of the pack and follow a mostly low salt diet. But salt skippers are the important trail blazers who show that it is not outlandish to follow a low salt diet, and that quality of life doesn't disappear never to be recovered ... is it possible for populations in the developed world to all follow a low salt diet? Most of us would know that it is, of course. But the majority of people don't and the national salt reduction programs are not designed to bring most people to a low salt diet, just a lower salt diet.

What is also needed is a group of people who encourage others to follow a true low salt diet – that's one of the contributions that salt skippers can make.

To read more about any of the programs mentioned, investigate the following websites:

www.nhmrc.gov.au/your_health/healthy/nutrition/review.htm

www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/food-health-dialogue

www.heartfoundation.org.au/healthy-eating/heart-foundation-tick/Pages/default.aspx

www.AWASH.org.au

www.salt.gov.uk

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/sodium/strateg/index-eng.php>

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cardio/cardio-salt-initiative.shtml>

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