

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY – UK SALT REDUCTION INITIATIVES

Background

In May 2003, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) published its report on Salt and Health. SACN concluded that the evidence of a link between high salt intake and high blood pressure was stronger than it had been when the issue had last been considered in the early 1990's. SACN also concluded that a reduction in the average salt intake of the population would proportionally lower population blood pressure levels and confer significant public health benefits by reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. SACN recommended that the average salt intake of the population should be reduced from the then current levels of 9.5g to 6g per day, with lower levels recommended for children. The report can be found at:

www.sacn.gov.uk/pdfs/sacn_salt_final.pdf

Following publication of the SACN report, the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Department of Health (DH) made a commitment to reduce salt intakes in line with the reports recommendations. The work has been taken forward in 2 main areas:

1. Reformulation work which entails working with all sectors of the food industry - retailers, manufacturers, trade associations, caterers and suppliers to the catering industry to reduce the salt content of processed food products.
2. An ongoing public awareness campaign to inform consumers of the issues and provide them with guidance on how to reduce their salt intake.

The salt reduction work is in line with the Agency's strategic plan and with wider Government documents; including those of the Department of Health, the Cabinet Office and the Devolved Administrations.

Programme of work with industry

One of the first tools that the Agency devised to help prompt discussions with the food industry was the salt model. This was a theoretical model which demonstrated one way in which the 6g intake target could be achieved through both reductions in levels of salt in foods and consumers' discretionary intake of salt (i.e. that added whilst cooking and at the table). Further details of this can be found at:

www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/salt/saltmodel

At a meeting with stakeholders in November 2003, industry were called upon by the then Minister responsible for Public Health to write to her by February 2004 outlining what they were doing to reduce salt in food. Forty-four (44) plans were received in total from a mixture of manufacturers, retailers and trade associations, procurement bodies, voluntary organisations and academic institutions – 25 of these were from the food industry. By October 2009 the Agency had received over 90 formal commitments from all sectors of the food industry including all the major UK retailers, a number of multinational and key national manufacturers and caterers, as well as trade associations for products making major contributions to intakes. In addition other salt reduction work not covered by these commitments has been brought to our attention.

Following receipt of these plans the Agency has undertaken a programme of follow-up work with a range of key organisations in each sector of the food industry. The aim is to establish effective one-to-one working relationships, better understand the needs of different sectors, consolidate initial progress, and to negotiate specific measurable commitments to salt reduction capable of delivering the Agency's target of 6g daily intake. The industry has indicated that it welcomes this interactive approach with the Agency and is generally positive about the potential for further reductions over time.

Overcoming barriers

In negotiating measurable commitments to salt reduction it became clear that there were a number of barriers including:

- Consumer acceptance
- Technological barriers
- Microbial safety.

There was particular concern over salt reduction in meat products and the Agency, in partnership with the industry's trade body (British Meat Processors Association), developed guidance for this sector on how to approach the process of reducing salt. The Guidance provides information and practical tips for businesses on how to reduce salt in meat products, while considering factors such as food safety, labelling and additives.
[www.bmpa.uk.com/ Attachments/Resources/1307_S4.pdf](http://www.bmpa.uk.com/Attachments/Resources/1307_S4.pdf)

Bread contributes around 20% (NDNS 2001) to dietary salt intakes so reducing salt levels in bread is an important contribution to achieving the Government's population average salt intake goal of 6g per day. For this reason the Agency has funded research, in partnership with industry and a research institute, to better understand how salt levels affect the physical and biochemical bases of stickiness, collapse and open texture in premium quality plant bread dough. This research aims to help industry to better understand how salt interacts with other elements in bread production. The findings of this research were published in August 2009.
www.foodbase.org.uk//admintools/reportdocuments/364-1-627_Salt_reduction_in_premium_bread_report_Final.pdf

The FSA has also funded a project in association with the National Association of Master Bakers to support salt reduction in the local craft bakery sector

The project has carried out a significant amount of test baking to measure the effect of factors such as process, flour quality and product format on the quality of bread baked with different levels of salt. A sample of bakeries have been visited to support bakers in making bread with lower salt levels and to assess consumer reaction. The outcome of the project will be the production and dissemination of guidance to craft bakers to enable them to adjust their method and ingredients used in a typical dough recipe to produce a range of bread products which meet the 2012 FSA salt targets. This guidance will be made available towards the end of 2009.

Voluntary salt reduction targets

To help guide the food industry as to the type of foods in which reductions are required, and the level of reductions that are needed to help reduce consumers' intakes, the Agency developed proposals for targets for salt levels in a wide range of food categories. These targets were the subject of a public consultation in August 2005. Seventy-four responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders, including retailers, manufacturers, caterers and trade associations, consumer organisations, enforcement bodies, health-related organisations, academics and local authorities. The responses included comments that covered all aspects of the work to set salt targets. Full details of the consultation can be found at:

www.food.gov.uk/Consultations/ukwideconsults/2005/saltconsultonintakes

Following the consultation, the FSA met with a range of stakeholders throughout January 2006 to discuss some of the problems raised by respondents and to collect more data before finalising the targets. While some concerns were expressed by some industry interests regarding the acceptability to consumers of products containing lower salt levels, there is evidence to suggest that consumer palates can readily adapt to lower-salt products, particularly if these reductions are made in small steps.

The first set of salt targets were finalised and published in March 2006. These covered 85 categories of processed food that contribute most salt to the diet, including staple foods such as bread, bacon, breakfast cereals and cheese, as well as a wide range of convenience foods. The FSA believes that the targets published in 2006 were set at levels that were challenging for the food industry but also offered good progress towards reducing levels of salt in these products to help meet our 6g per day target.

2008 review of salt targets

At the time the targets were set in 2006 the Agency committed to a review in 2008 to consider progress made, the potential for setting further targets and to explore any further technical difficulties that had been identified.

The review started in December 2007 with the Agency holding a series of stakeholder meetings. An initial meeting was used to outline the review process and a further 18 smaller food sector specific stakeholder meetings (January/February 2008) were held to discuss each of the targets in detail. At the sector specific meetings industry were asked to report on progress on salt reduction to date, any significant challenges experienced, and what further levels of salt reduction could be achieved. In addition, a number of one to one meetings with companies were held (March/June 2008).

When setting the proposed revised targets the Agency took account of the outcomes of these meetings, levels of salt in products, reductions achieved to date, expert advice on technical and safety issues, ongoing research and data on current intakes. A 14 week public consultation on the proposed revised targets was published on 22 July 2008.

The key proposals for the consultation were:

- To revise, in the light of experience and progress to date, the UK targets for the levels of salt in key categories of manufactured foods. Revised targets were proposed for a limited range of food categories for 2010, and new targets were proposed for most foods (with some minor exceptions) for 2012.
- To revise some product category descriptions.
- To adopt a rolling programme of biennial reviews of industry progress and the need for further adjustments to the targets. The first review to take place in 2010.
- To revise the monitoring framework for the salt reduction policy.

The consultation closed in October 2008 and around 60 responses were received. One of the key issues raised in industry responses on the revised targets was the potential costs of reformulation activities. The Agency held meetings with a number of manufacturers and retailers to gain a better understanding of the wide range of drivers for salt reduction, the costs associated with reformulation work and how salt targets impact on these. The final revised targets and the summary of consultation responses were published on the FSA's website on 18 May 2009.

The final targets and a summary of consultation responses can be found at the following links:

www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/spreadsheets/saltpolicies20102012.xls

www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/consultationresponse/saltreductiontargetresponse.pdf

Progress by industry to date

All sectors of the food industry - retailers, manufacturers, trade associations, caterers and suppliers to the catering industry - have responded positively to calls to reduce salt in foods and continue to be engaged in this programme. The number of organisations committed to salt reduction has nearly tripled since 2004, from 25 to over 90 organisations now being committed to reducing salt, the majority of which are working towards the FSA salt reduction targets.

Unless otherwise stated the following statements of progress by industry against the 2010 salt targets refer to those set by the Agency in 2006.

Retailers

Major retailers, including ASDA, Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury, Tesco, Morrisons and Waitrose, as well as Iceland, Co-op, Somerfield, Budgens and Spar are working towards the FSA's voluntary salt reduction targets. Some companies, such as Waitrose, Asda and Co-op are planning to meet the targets before 2010, with Marks and Spencer working to achieve targets in key product categories as maxima rather than averages and before 2010 where possible.

Achievements by retailers include:

- In January 2008 Asda indicated that it had met all the FSA's salt targets.
- Boots has already met the voluntary salt reduction targets ahead of the 2010 deadline.

- Budgens, Iceland and Somerfield are working towards achieving the salt targets by 2010 and have products that already meet the targets.
- The Co-operative has an ongoing salt reduction policy and already meets the original FSA salt targets across all of its own-brand lines. Some key ranges, including bread, ready meals, sandwiches, soup and sauces, met the FSA 2010 salt targets 2 years ahead of the deadline.
- Marks and Spencer is aiming to meet the FSA 2010 targets in key areas as a maximum, rather than an average.
- Morrisons are on track to meet the FSA's 2010 salt targets and have already succeeded in ensuring all breakfast cereals, ready meals and 90% of its pre-packed and fresh breads have achieved these target.
- Sainsbury's is working towards achieving the targets and states that it has already met the target for its own-brand standard sliced bread, which is one of the top three products in Sainsbury's shoppers' baskets. It has also met the 2010 targets in 80% of its own-brand products, including breakfast cereal, ready meals, bread and soups.
- Spar is aiming to meet the targets by 2010.
- Half of Tesco own-brand products now meet the 2010 salt targets.
- Waitrose meets the salt targets for all the categories highlighted in the FSA campaign. Similar progress has been achieved across all remaining categories with many products at or below the targets originally set by the Agency for 2010.

Manufacturers

Major manufacturers, such as Arla Foods, Bernard Matthews, Birds Eye, Cadbury Schweppes, Heinz, Kelloggs, Kerry Foods, Kraft, Mars, McCain, Nestlé, Northern Foods, PepsiCo, Premier Foods, Procter & Gamble, Unilever, United Biscuits and Vion Foods, are all working towards achieving the salt reduction targets.

Achievements by manufacturers include:

- Arla Foods has committed to up to a 50% salt reduction in its soft cheese range and has already achieved a reduction of 15% in butter.
- Allied Bakeries is set to achieve the 2010 salt reduction targets across all products by December 2009.
- Bernard Matthews, Cadbury Schweppes and Northern Foods are aiming to meet the targets by 2010.
- Birds Eye ready meals now all contain less than 2g of salt.
- Ninety-seven percent (97%) of Burton's Foods products meet the original salt targets for 2010 and their products on average meet their target categories.
- Heinz has introduced its standard Heinz Tomato Ketchup with salt levels that meet the FSA revised target for 2010. Heinz has also reduced the amount of salt in baked beans and canned pasta by around one-third and in children's pasta ranges by 59%.
- Kerry Foods has reduced the level of salt in its standard cheese slices by 32% and in its reduced fat slices by 21%.
- Kraft has reduced levels of salt in its cheese spreads and snack products by 33%.
- Mars has achieved a salt reduction of up to 35% across their Dolmio, Uncle Ben's and Seeds of Change sauces. The majority of their products already meet the original 2010 salt targets and they are now focussed on working towards the 2012 targets.

- McCain has halved the salt content of some of its potato products and has launched a 'no added salt' product. McCain is continuing to make further reductions where feasible in order to achieve the 2012 salt targets which will represent a 22% reduction in average levels of salt across its range compared with the 2001 baseline.
- Across the range, Nestle now meets the FSA 2010 target for its breakfast cereals.
- PepsiCo has removed 25% of the salt from its standard Walkers Crisps and Walkers Lights, and has reduced levels in its Walkers Sensations by around 45%. It has also reduced levels of salt in a number of its snack products by between 25% and 55%.
- Premier Foods is reformulating many Batchelors products to meet the 2010 targets, for example its Batchelors range of savory rice, for which sodium levels will be reduced by up to 70%.
- Unilever states that it has developed a nutrition enhancement programme, which benchmarks for the foods that they produce to target a dietary intake of 2400mg of sodium per day by the end of 2010 and a daily intake of 2000mg by 2015.
- United Biscuits has reduced the amount of salt in its top selling biscuits by about a fifth. In its crisps and snacks portfolio it has achieved a 13% sodium reduction and will continue to make further reductions.
- From January 2008, Vion Food Group (a Dutch bacon manufacturer providing 25% of UK bacon sales) reduced the average level of salt in its products to 3.5g salt per 100g.

Trade associations

Trade associations are supporting the work of their members and have co-ordinated salt reduction programmes for a number of key foods that contribute to salt intakes.

- Members of the Association of Cereal Food Manufacturers have achieved a 44% reduction in salt (measured from sodium) in breakfast cereals between 1998 and 2008.
- Project Neptune was an initiative set up by the Food and Drink Federation, the aim of which was to achieve reductions of around 30% in soups and cooking and pasta sauces, over 3 years (2003-2005) in roughly equal steps of 10% per year. At the end of the initiative, an overall average reduction of around 30% in cooking and pasta sauces, and an overall reduction of one quarter in soups.
- The Federation of Bakers has been working with the FSA to reduce the amount of salt in bread and has achieved a reduction of over 30% in pre-packed sliced bread which accounts for around 80% of bread sold in the UK.
- The Joint Sodium Working Party (JSWP) has been working with manufacturers of meat products to reduce levels of salt in these foods. At the end of its initial two year plan, considerable reductions had been achieved in a number of product categories and, overall, less than a quarter of the products for which data was held exceeded the JSWP's target.
- The Biscuit, Chocolate, Cake and Confectionery Association has reduced levels of salt in biscuits by between 25% and 45% and in cakes by 25%.
- In 2007 the Snack, Nut and Crisp Manufacturers Association achieved salt reductions of 13% in crisps, 32% in extruded snacks and 27% in pelleted snacks.

There is further salt reduction work going on in each of these sectors.

Catering sector

Since 2008 the Agency has been working with industry to secure voluntary commitments on healthier catering. To date more than 40 of the UK's major catering companies (including two of the largest suppliers to the foodservice sector) have published the activities they are undertaking on procurement, menu planning, consumer information, and kitchen practice. All companies have activities relating to salt reduction, the vast majority using the FSA's salt targets to benchmark and monitor progress, whilst others are using the Agency's traffic light nutrient guidelines in a similar way.

Some of the companies involved include Brakes, Compass Group, Costa, KFC, McDonalds, Pizza Hut and Subway.

- Brakes has an ongoing salt reduction programme: with 70% of its product sales now meeting the FSA's 2010 salt targets (an increase from 50% in January 2008)
- Compass Group, a large contract caterer that provides meals to schools and hospitals, has a programme to review levels of salt in products and requires suppliers to meet, or to be working towards, the FSA salt targets.
- Costa announced that in 2008 it reduced the salt level in paninis by approximately 14% which now meet the FSA 2010 salt targets for bread products. The company also stated that where possible, the recipes for all food products will be reformulated in 2009 to meet the FSA 2010 salt targets.
- KFC no longer pre-salts its fries.
- McDonalds has reduced the amount of salt in its products by between 14% and 75% and is continuing to make further reductions.
- Pizza Hut has had a salt reduction programme since 2004 reporting a 30% reduction to date across its menus
- By June 2009, Subway announced that all Subs will have a 15% reduction in sodium. By 2010, more than 75% of their Subs and salads will meet the FSA 2010 salt target.

Further details of the commitments can be found at:

<http://www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/healthycatering/cateringbusiness/commitments>

The Agency has worked with the catering sector to develop a flexible framework that recognises the different challenges faced by the sector, and the enormous variation between caterers both in terms of how their businesses and kitchens operate, and the expectations of their customers. The framework is therefore appropriate for businesses of all sizes in all parts of the sector. The Framework promotes joined-up actions across:

- Procurement
- Kitchen Practice
- Menu Planning
- Consumer Information

The framework is therefore appropriate for businesses of all sizes in all parts of the sector. The Agency is therefore currently working to extend the progress we have made with workplace caterers to other parts of the sector. Caterers with a highly standardised menu and kitchen operation can go further, and make commitments related to the salt content of their final products. In many of the commitments that already appear on our website, caterers have committed to meet the targets for the ingredients and products they procure – and a small number have in fact committed to meeting salt targets in a range of final products.

The FSA would like to see more consistent nutrition information for consumers at the point they make a decision about what they eat out of home and in January 2009 announced that the first step will be the introduction of calorie labelling. The FSA is talking to a range of companies that will act as early adopters to introduce calorie labelling in 2009. This activity will see calorie information provided on menus and other materials available at the point consumers choose what to eat.

Monitoring of changes in intakes and levels of salt in food

The FSA has also set up a programme to track and monitor commitments and reductions in salt in the following ways:

1. A UK wide survey of salt intakes (via urinary sodium analysis) was carried out in 2005/06 to estimate changes following the work to that point on salt reduction. The data showed a reduction in average salt intakes of 0.5g to a level of 9g per day, with male intake reducing from 11g a day to 10.2g a day and female intake falling from 8.1g day to 7.6g day in Great Britain.
www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2007/mar/saltresearchmar07
2. The fieldwork for a further UK wide salt intakes survey (again via urinary sodium analysis) was carried out in the first quarter of 2008. The results provide a positive indication of a continued downward trend in sodium intakes. Our best estimate of average population intakes for 2008 is 8.6g a reduction of 0.9g compared to intakes of 9.5g in 2000/01. Clearly further reductions in the level of salt in food supplied for sale to the consumer will be needed if we are to continue to progress towards our intake goal.
www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/08sodiumreport.pdf
3. Levels of salt in processed foods have been monitored via a Processed Food Databank. The databank was designed as a reference tool to provide indicative information on levels of sodium, fat, sugar and a range of other nutrients in processed foods from data collected from the labels of around 1000 products bought in the UK between December 2004 and February 2005. A second sampling round was carried out in 2007 to repeat and extend the earlier round; with the data published in January 2008. The databanks can be accessed via the Agency's website at:
www.food.gov.uk/science/dietarysurveys/pfdbranch/

4. In 2007 the Agency purchased data from a marketing company listing sales data and sodium levels in over 130,000 products on sale in the UK. This data has been used to inform the review of salt targets. The Agency will continue to purchase this nutritional data in order and to monitor the industry's salt reduction progress.
5. The FSA developed a self-reporting framework (SRF) to be used to track food industry progress towards achieving the Agency's targets. The framework was published in August 2007 and the first round of data on salt reductions was submitted by industry in October and November of that year. The operation of the SRF is being reviewed and a new template is being devised to enable the industry to submit data for a limited number of food categories.
6. The Agency also intends to collect information annually through a Salt Commitments Table. Industry will be asked to provide details on a voluntary basis and to supply information on the targets that apply to them in the following areas:
 - Overall progress to date (where this data is available)
 - Progress on salt reduction for the proceeding year
 - Plans for the coming year
 - The number of targets that they have met out of the total that apply to them.

Public Awareness Campaign

In order to raise awareness of salt as a public health issue, and inform consumers how to lower their intakes, the FSA has been running a public awareness campaign since 2004 with a supporting consumer focused website: www.eatwell.gov.uk

The FSA has already run three phases of its public awareness campaign. The first phase was launched in September 2004, with the key aim of ensuring that consumers were aware of why too much salt is bad for their health.

www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2004/sep/saltcampaignnews

The second phase of the campaign was launched in October 2005, with the main messages focusing on encouraging consumers to check food labels for information on the salt content and to raise awareness of the aim to eat no more than 6g of salt a day.

www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2005/oct/sixgrams

www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2005/oct/294644

The FSA launched the third phase of its public awareness campaign on 19th March 2007. The messaging focused on informing consumers that 75% of the salt we eat is already in everyday foods as well as encouraging and enabling them to choose products with lower levels of salt.

www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2007/mar/saltcampaignmar07

All three phases of the campaign have focused on women aged 35-65 in social class categories C1C2D. Although men are more likely to suffer from heart disease and stroke, women continue to be the "gatekeepers" with regard to buying and preparing food in family households in the UK, hence the focus on this group. A range of media

have been used to deliver the messages, including TV advertising, posters, articles in women's press and national newspapers and news coverage.

As well as the salt website, all three phases of the campaign have produced materials for consumers, such as leaflets and credit card sized prompts, to try and help consumers increase their awareness of the issues and the action they can take.

For phases 2 and 3 work was also undertaken by a range of stakeholders – both in the food industry and non-governmental organisations – to try and get the campaign messages across to a wider audience.

Evaluation of the campaign, through monitoring changes in consumers' claimed behaviour, suggests that:

- the number of consumers cutting down on salt has increased by around one-third;
- there has been a 10-fold increase in awareness of the 6g a day message; and
- the number of consumers trying to cut down on salt by checking labels has doubled.

The fourth phase of our consumer messaging on salt was launched on 5 October 2009. The campaign highlights the positive changes consumers can make to reduce their salt intake. Key messages include:

- Most of the salt we eat is already in everyday foods.
- You can lower your salt intake by checking the labels to compare products, and choosing foods that are lower in salt.
- We should aim to have no more than 6g salt per day, and children under 11 should have less than this.

In addition the Agency has in place a three year mass media campaign aimed at promoting healthy eating; salt messages will form part of this framework.

EU and International work on salt reduction

The Agency is taking steps to raise the profile of its salt reduction work with other Member States (MS) and encourage similar action across Europe. In January 2004, all European Food Agencies issued a joint statement on the need to significantly reduce salt intakes through a number of actions. Progress on salt reduction was discussed at both the EU Heads of Agencies meeting and the European Commission's Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, during UK presidency in 2005.

Salt reduction has since featured in both the EU White paper: A strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues and in the second World Health Organisation (WHO) European Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Policy 2007-2012.

In order to progress its work on nutrition, in areas which remain within MS competence, the Commission have set up a high level group of officials with the aim of spreading best practice faster and more efficiently. Initial meetings in November 2007 and April and July 2008 focused on salt reduction and identified, from existing models being successfully operated in a number of MS, common elements which were developed into a framework

for action. 25 out of 27 MS submitted their commitments against this framework and these have now been published on the DG Sanco website:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/documents/national_salt_en.pdf

The next HLG meeting will be held in December 2009.

In June 2007, at a meeting of nutrition counterparts the UK volunteered to lead the European Salt Action Network (ESAN) to facilitate the implementation of the WHO action plan. The first meeting of the ESAN was held in Slovenia on 18/19 March 2008. ESAN members are working to establish best practice and set up suitable protocols for monitoring, communication and industry engagement with salt reduction work,

The second ESAN meeting was held in London on 27/28th February 2009. The agenda for the meeting included discussion on how to monitor sodium intakes in individual countries and across ESAN and the issues related to setting salt reduction targets. In addition, the meeting examined approaches to salt reduction in the catering sector, and had an in depth look at the technical issues surrounding salt reduction in meat products and cheese with presentations from experts from the Netherlands and Finland.

The next meeting will be held in Malta in November 2009.

The UK has been approached by a number of other countries for information about its salt reduction programme. Interested parties include France, Spain, the Nordic Countries and Germany. There has also been some interest from the US, Canada, Brazil and Australia and New Zealand. The UK will also host a WHO Global Platform on salt reduction in March 2010.