

16 March 2017

Salty South Africa – are we doing better after salt legislation?

South Africa passed world-leading legislation to reduce salt intake fully supported by the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) and World Action on Salt and Health (WASH). Despite this, too many South African eat too much salt, putting themselves at risk of heart disease and strokes as we approach Salt Awareness Week from 20-26 March.

Salt – a forgotten killer

Excess salt intake directly increases blood pressure in most people, and exacerbates high blood pressure in people who already have this condition. “High blood pressure is not only caused by high salt intake, and factors such as genetics, obesity, fruit and vegetable intake, stress, smoking and a lack of exercise all contribute. However, reducing salt intake is a safe, affordable and effective strategy to reduce high blood pressure or avoid developing high blood pressure” says Prof Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA).

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that it's African region has the highest prevalence of high blood pressure globally. People of African origin are more prone to salt sensitivity, and excess salt is consumed through both liberal addition of salt to meals and as salt hidden in many processed foods. In South Africa, the prevalence of high blood pressure ranges from 30% to as high as 80% in adults over the age of 50 years ¹.

A world-leader in salt reduction

South Africa is ahead of the pack with ground-breaking legislation to limit the salt content of certain foods. June 2016 marked the implementation of these regulations that have reduced salt in commonly consumed foods such as breads, breakfast cereals, and processed meats. So far legislation has been hugely successful with most manufacturers complying, and some products have reduced salt content by 30 to 40%.

What can the food industry do?

During World Salt Awareness Week, WASH and the HSFSA are calling on manufacturers to put less salt in our food, and challenge everyone to read food labels and choose the lower salt options – it's as easy as that! Salt legislation will reduce salt intake by approximately 0.85 grams per person per day, depending on the individual's food choices. One study estimated that this level of salt reduction will result in 7 400 fewer cardiovascular deaths and 4 300 fewer non-fatal strokes every year in South Africa ².

The WHO recommends that total salt intake should not exceed one teaspoon a day, an amount equal to 5 grams. The average South African eats roughly 8.5 grams of salt per day (range of 6 – 11 grams), with some people eating significantly more than this ³. Salt legislation is a good start, but it is inadequate to curb excess salt intake.

How do we eat so much salt?

“Salt intake is not easy to measure and is hidden in almost everything we eat, even sweet foods. When adding extra salt in cooking or at the table, all the pinches, shakes and grinds of salt add more salt than we actually need. One take-out meal can triple our salt limit for one day. Even something as simple as a cheese and ham sandwich can provide 2.5 grams of salt, already half the daily limit” says Gabriel Eksteen, Dietitian and Exercise Physiologist at the foundation.

Do YOU eat too much salt?

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA launched an online salt calculator in 2015 in partnership with Unilever South Africa. This is the easiest way to see how much salt you eat, and which are the main salty culprits in your diet. The calculator has been carefully updated to improve accuracy and to reflect changes after salt legislation. Test your salt intake at www.saltcalculator.co.za. You may be surprised where your salt comes from!

How to reduce salt intake

Total salt intake includes what is already in the food, and what people add to food while preparing or eating the food. Choose foods wisely, keeping an eye out for food products with the Heart Mark logo and eat salty foods less often. How much salt is added at home is completely in the individual’s hands. When using salty ingredients like stock cubes, soy sauce or chicken spice as part of cooking, don’t add any further salt. Taste food while cooking and at the table, and think twice before adding more salt!

Change your salty ways in 3 simple steps:

<p>1</p>  <p>Choose less salty foods - look for the Heart Mark!</p> <p>Cook at home with fresh ingredients.</p>	<p>2</p>  <p>Cook with less salt.</p> <p>Use dry herbs, spices, garlic, lemon and chilli for flavour. If you use salty ingredients, don't add salt too.</p>	<p>3</p>  <p>Do not add salt to prepared food.</p> <p>Taste food before adding more salt and better yet, remove salt shaker from the table.</p>
--	--	--

Get tested

One in every two South Africans with high blood pressure remain unaware of their condition. This prevents effective care and increases the risk of heart diseases and strokes. The HSFSA recommends that all adults test their blood pressure at least once every year. The public can get their blood pressure measured for free from 17 March until 9 April at all Dis-Chem pharmacies nationwide.

The next step forward

South African salt legislation will further reduce the salt levels of certain foods by 2019. Yet many foods are excluded from legislation, including fast foods. The HSFSA call on the fast food industry to clearly display the salt content of their meals, and to start reducing the salt content of their offerings. Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at The Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine and Chairman of WASH comments: “Salt damages our health. Salt reduction is the simplest and most cost effective measure to prevent thousands of unnecessary deaths from stroke and heart attacks every year. It is not just down to the individuals; manufactures must stop adding salt to our foods. During World Salt Awareness Week you can do something great for your health by eating less salt“.

¹ Lloyd-Sherlock P, et al. Hypertension among older adults in low- and middle-income countries: prevalence, awareness and control. *Int J Epidemiol.* 2014 Feb;43(1):116-28. doi: 10.1093/ije/dyt215

² Bertram *et al.* Reducing the sodium content of high-salt foods: Effect on cardiovascular disease in South Africa. *S Afr Med J* 2012;102(9):743-745. DOI:10.7196/SAMJ.5832

Ends

About the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) plays a leading role in the fight against preventable heart disease and stroke, with the aim of seeing fewer people in South Africa suffer premature deaths and disabilities. The HSFSA, established in 1980 is a non-governmental, non-profit organization which relies on external funding to sustain the work it carries out.

The HSFSA aims to reduce the cardiovascular disease (CVD) burden in South Africa and ultimately on the health care system of South Africa. Our mission is to empower people in South Africa to adopt healthy lifestyles, make healthy choices easier, seek appropriate care and encourage prevention.

Contact person

Nuraan Cader
Public Relations & Communications Manager
Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa
nuraan.cader@heartfoundation.co.za
021-4221586