

# Salt Awareness Week

9 - 15 March 2020



## Salt Awareness Week 2020: Hide and Seek

Two-thirds of South Africans consume too much salt per day while the country's growing blood pressure epidemic is one of the worst globally. Eating less salt is difficult, with salt **'hiding'** in many foods and **'seeking'** out lower-salt options too complicated. During *Salt Awareness Week*, **the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa** joins forces with *World Action on Salt & Health* to highlight the need for ongoing efforts, from the food sector and consumers alike, to strive for less salt.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends to not exceed 5 grams of salt per day. Excess salt intake continues to be a global health concern, contributing to a growing blood pressure epidemic, resulting in cardiovascular disease, the world's number one cause of death.

South Africa is particularly hard hit, with estimates ranging from one in every three to over 50% of adults living with high blood pressure. Even more worrying, in South Africa, high blood pressure often goes undiagnosed and is poorly controlled, leading to entirely preventable deaths from heart disease, kidney disease and strokes. High blood pressure or hypertension is defined as blood pressure greater than 140mmHg systolic or 90mmHg diastolic, whereas less than 120/80 is optimal.

Lowering salt intake is an effective way to help manage high blood pressure and to abate the rise in blood pressure that occurs in most adults as they age. If South Africans reduced their daily salt intake by as little as 0.85 g/ day, this could result in 7 400 fewer deaths from heart diseases and strokes, and 4 300 fewer non-lethal strokes each year.

### ***‘Reducing salt intake is not easy’***

Unfortunately, reducing salt intake is not easy for several reasons. Most of the salt people consume is hidden in packaged foods and the more salt is added during cooking and at the table. Daily intake should not exceed 5 grams salt or 2000mg sodium, but it’s hardly possible to know how much you actually consume! People become accustomed to their habitual salt intake, unaware that they eat too much salt, and foods don’t taste overly salty, even when they are salt-laden. Not surprisingly, a recent [study](#) found 28% of nearly 900 South Africans consumed more than 9 grams salt a day, doubling the daily limit.

Reducing salt intake should not be only the individual's responsibility. In a fast-paced modern world, most people rely heavily on processed foods and these have become progressively saltier. The South African 2013 sodium regulations, which restrict salt levels in certain foods, has been a literal lifesaver, reducing salt content in foods like bread, potato crisps and stock cubes. **The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa** commends food manufacturers who are complying with sodium limits and urges others to do so. All foods which carry the Foundations’ recognisable Heart Mark logo comply with the sodium regulations, in addition, to other nutrient criteria.

### ***‘Choosing less-salty options remains too complex’***

Yet, sodium legislation does not apply to all salty foods and choosing less-salty options based on packaging information remains too complex. Nutrition labels list sodium not salt, ingredient lists hide salt under names like sodium glutamate or baking soda, and suggested portion sizes on products can be inappropriate. **The Foundation** would like to see food labelling that helps to make the salt content of foods easily discernible.

Besides legislation and labelling of foods, foods like crisps will always be very salty and should be consumed infrequently at best. Salty snacks are cleverly marketed and unsurprisingly are popular, even at school tuckshops. Children are especially vulnerable to persuasive advertising and their taste perceptions are still developing.

**Professor Pamela Naidoo, the Foundations’ CEO** comments on this, saying “it’s time we see restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and what’s available to them at school where they spend most of their day”.

### ***‘Food sectors should be held accountable for the foods they sell’***

Another concern is that most food outlets don’t make nutritional information readily available, even though a meal combo can easily exceed the recommended daily salt limit. The takeaway, Fast-food and informal food sectors should be held accountable for the foods they sell, and nutritional information should be visible at the point of sale, not hidden away. The global action group to reduce salt intake, *World Action on Salt and Health (WASH)*, echoes this sentiment in their statement, “We all deserve to know what is in our food and restaurants, cafes and takeaways should have nutrition information on menus to help the public find the healthier option”.

Even though the food supply is full of hidden salt, consumers can be savvier in choosing lower-salt options. People often 'hide' from making healthier choices by disregarding nutritional information on packaging. One in three South African admits to not being interested in eating less salt, while 48% are at least trying to eat less. Useful strategies to 'seek' out hidden salt includes comparing nutritional information between similar items, searching for sodium among the first few ingredients on the ingredient list, and looking out for the heart mark logo on approved foods.

### ***'The Foundation is continuing its trailblazing work'***

**The Heart and Stroke Foundation** is continuing its trailblazing work in reducing the salt consumption of South Africans. The Foundation is part of a collaboration who was recently awarded an international LINKS grant to evaluating how well the food industry is complying with the sodium regulation targets and to develop monitoring systems. The foundation will engage with stakeholders do this, in addition to ongoing efforts to create consumer awareness around salt and health.

#### **Ends**

Interviews will be conducted with our CEO, Prof Pamela Naidoo, our dietitians, nutritionist, health promoters, and relevant experts. To co-ordinate and confirm interview dates you are welcome to contact the Public Relations and Communications Department on 021-422 1586 or email:

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#### **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.

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