Australians are eating dangerously high levels of salt.

AWASH
Australian Division of World Action on Salt & Health

STRATEGIC REVIEW 2007-08

DROP THE SALT!
CHAIR'S REPORT

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in Australia, accounting for some 48,000 deaths in 2004. Excess salt consumed throughout life causes blood pressure to rise with age, which increases the risk of serious cardiovascular disease.

The good news is that reducing salt intakes can substantially reduce blood pressure levels for all population groups, helping to reverse these risks. In May 2007, the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) launched the Drop the Salt! campaign to reduce daily population salt intakes to below 6 grams over five years.

It has been heartening to look back on the year's achievements and note the tremendous progress that's been made. Salt reduction has been on the health policy agenda in Australia for over 25 years and yet never before has there been a coordinated national campaign, engaging both the food industry and government to achieve clear targets.

Reducing salt in foods

Since the campaign launch, the food industry has demonstrated a strong commitment to action. Many companies have made further reductions in salt or pledged future action. AWASH has established a database to monitor changes in salt levels in foods. Over the next year we will be looking to ensure that more companies across all sectors of the food industry have salt reduction programs in place. We will also consider the usefulness of introducing targets for salt levels in key product categories.

Raising consumer awareness

Our annual consumer polls have shown that consumer awareness about salt issues has not changed. This is not surprising. Changing consumer awareness requires a government funded sustained and comprehensive social marketing campaign. In the meantime, AWASH will continue to use the media, organise high-profile meetings, and issue regular stakeholder bulletins to ensure salt reduction remains high on the public agenda.

Improving labelling

Improved food labelling to enable people to choose lower salt foods is also key to the AWASH strategy. Currently, whilst a number of improved labelling formats have been proposed, there is no strong evidence for what would work most effectively. There needs to be independent research to ensure whatever scheme being proposed will help consumers make healthier choices. The Federal Government needs to take leadership on this and act quickly to ensure that such an important public health opportunity is not lost.

The urgent need for government action

The magnitude of the health gains achievable through population salt reduction is very large. Recent estimates suggest the deaths averted by moderate reductions in salt consumption would be at least as great as those achieved by plausible reductions in smoking. Reducing population salt intakes in Australia to below the currently recommended maximum, could avert tens of thousands of cardiovascular events in Australia by the year 2018. While much can be achieved through persistent advocacy, research and voluntary measures by industry, national leadership will be vital to the success of this campaign.

Bruce Neal
Chair, Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health
Senior Director, The George Institute for International Health
Professor of Medicine, The University of Sydney

KEY FACTS

✦ Cardiovascular disease costs around $5.5 billion – over 10% of Australia’s total health budget making it the most expensive disease in Australia.
✦ Blood pressure is the third leading cause of disease burden worldwide, ahead of both smoking and cholesterol and behind only unsafe sex and under-nutrition.
✦ It is estimated that half of all disease caused by blood pressure actually occurs amongst individuals with blood pressure levels below 140/90mmHg who would not normally be considered to have hypertension.
✦ The Australian Government and leading health organisations have established maximum recommended upper limits for salt consumption set for both the general population (6 grams/day) and people at risk of hypertension (4 grams/day).
✦ The Drop the Salt! campaign unites health professionals, the food industry, government, scientists and consumer organisations in a commitment to reduce salt intakes in Australia.
WHO WE ARE
AWASH is a network of representatives from the medical profession, scientific community, food industry, consumer associations, education and health promotion bodies that supports the health benefits of a population-wide reduction in dietary salt for Australia.

OUR MISSION
The mission of AWASH is to improve the health of Australians by achieving a gradual population-wide reduction in dietary salt consumption that will reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease and other salt-related health problems. AWASH launched the Drop the Salt! campaign in May 2007 and has developed a number of strategies, in partnership with relevant organisations, to achieve its objectives.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION
AWASH has established mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the campaign, including a database of salt levels in food products, an annual consumer poll and a media monitoring program.

FOOD INDUSTRY STRATEGY
Background
Both international and national experts agree that the most effective way of reducing population salt intakes is for the food industry to take salt out of processed foods.

Objective
To work collaboratively with the food ingredient, processing, retail and food service industries to achieve an average 25% reduction in the salt content of foods over five years.

Approach
✦ Review of industry action to date
✦ Detailed discussions with the food industry about what is possible
✦ Consultation on key elements of a strategy to reduce salt in foods
✦ Establishment of a database to enable assessment and monitoring of salt levels

Progress to date
Strategic proposals have been published on the AWASH website for comment. Bread, processed meat products and the fast food sector have been identified as priority areas for salt reduction.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council has pledged support to reduce population salt intakes. Several key companies (notably Coles and Smiths Snackfood Company) have already committed to reducing salt in their products by 25% over the next five years, in line with the AWASH strategy.

Meetings have been held with over 20 different companies and salt reduction commitments are detailed on the AWASH website.

Future plans
The AWASH food industry strategy proposes:
✦ High level commitment from the food industry by October 2008
✦ Individual company commitments and action plans by December 2008
✦ Consideration of targets for key product categories during 2009
✦ Promotion of good practice and innovation by food companies in reducing salt

Background
A government funded comprehensive social marketing campaign is essential to influence consumer behaviour. AWASH aims to raise the issue of salt on the agenda of key stakeholders and to encourage the government to take action.

Objectives
To utilise the media and other communication channels to increase the priority of salt reduction among key stakeholders while influencing consumer awareness and behaviour in relation to salt.

Approach
✦ Issuing regular topical press releases
✦ Writing articles and speaking at conferences and events
✦ Maintaining and promoting the Drop the Salt! website
✦ Distributing consumer brochures and producing and disseminating a quarterly stakeholder bulletin
✦ Organising high-profile meetings and presenting at key conferences and events

Table 1: Range of Sodium Levels in Products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>No products compared</th>
<th>Sodium content (mg/100g)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White bread</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>420-665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef burgers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>572-740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sausages</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>404-2157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbecue sauce</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>550-2140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomato sauce</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>355-1270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Comparison of Salt Levels in Australian Sliced Meat Products versus the UK Equivalents

Meet the Experts

Governance
AWASH is managed by a Secretariat with combined expertise in epidemiology, nutrition, program management and communications and supported by a research assistant. The Secretariat seeks and receives regular input from an advisory group which meets quarterly, has an opportunity to input on policy papers and receives advance notice of media releases and other relevant projects. Final decisions and responsibility rest with the Secretariat.

The Secretariat
Professor Bruce Neal (Chair) is a cardiovascular epidemiologist with a national and international reputation in the field of blood pressure control and sodium restriction.

As a Senior Director at The George Institute for International Health at the University of Sydney, Bruce directs the work of four divisions working on Cardiovascular, Renal, Neurological and Nutrition and Lifestyle.

Dr Caryl Nowson is Professor of Nutrition and Aging at Deakin University. Caryl has more than 20 years experience in conducting dietary research studies. She has extensive expertise in nutritional intervention and longitudinal studies in the area of osteoporosis and hypertension and is particularly well known for her work on nutrition and blood pressure.

Jane Austin is Director of Marketing and Communications at The George Institute for International Health. Jane has international experience in management and marketing within the corporate sector, much of it in the fast-paced telecommunications industry. More recently she has worked with non-profit organisations, with a particular interest in health. Jane sits on the advisory board of a health practice on the Central Coast and is a Director of the Asthma Foundation of New South Wales.

Jacqui Webster is Senior Project Manager for AWASH at The George Institute for International Health. Jacqui has over 12 years experience working on food and nutrition issues and was previously responsible for the development and implementation of the UK Government salt reduction strategy. She has extensive policy expertise in relation to socio-economic determinants of diet, stakeholder involvement and food and nutrition policy. Jacqui is also undertaking a PhD in public health advocacy at the University of Sydney’s School of Public Health.

Elizabeth Dunford is the Research Assistant for AWASH at The George Institute for International Health. Elizabeth has a Masters degree in Public Health and previously worked as a nutrition researcher with Food & Nutrition Australia. Elizabeth is primarily responsible for the development of the database to monitor salt levels in processed foods, production of the stakeholder bulletin and provision of research support to the various strands of the Drop the Salt! campaign.

"The Heart Foundation is very supportive of initiatives such as Drop the Salt! which improve public health through changing the food supply in a positive direction and thereby improving the health status of Australians."
Progress to date

Several key media releases have been issued over 2007/2008 resulting in over 100 pieces of news coverage including local and national radio, TV and print coverage.

 Hits to the AWASH website continue to grow, with five times as many visitors in June 2008 as when it was first launched (May 2007). Visitors were up 67% in the last quarter of 2007-8 compared to the first quarter.

 Two brochures have been produced and distributed to over 1000 individuals and organisations and a quarterly bulletin has been distributed to over 500 stakeholders.

 The debate on salt and children chaired by Dr Norman Swan during Salt Awareness was attended by over 100 people.

 AWASH has also presented at a range of high-profile conferences and events (see below).

 Future plans

✦ Continue to issue regular press releases to highlight key issues on salt
✦ Development of the Drop the Salt! website
✦ Report on magazine monitoring and TV monitoring project
✦ Encouraging government to support a comprehensive consumer awareness campaign.

KEY CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
✦ Public-private partnerships to reduce salt intakes. 38th Public Health Association of Australia Annual Conference, Alice Springs, September 2007
✦ The role of state health departments in reducing the salt intake of populations, Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services, Hobart, March 2008
✦ Developing state strategies to reduce population salt intakes, Dietitians Association of Australia Annual Conference, Gold Coast, May 2008
✦ Association of Bakers’ conference, Melbourne, April 2008.

FIGURE 2: COMPARISON OF RESULTS FROM 2007 & 2008 CONSUMER POLL

Monitoring has demonstrated little change in consumer awareness about salt issues between 2007 and 2008 demonstrating the urgent need for a government funded comprehensive social marketing campaign.

EXAMPLES OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Australia smart on salt, but slow to act – ABC Radio, May 2007
Aussies slow to hold the salt – Science Alert, May 2007
AWASH supports American Medical Association in the international dispute over salt – ABC Radio National, July 2007
Drop The Salt! AWASH Calls For Salt Reduction To Be Election Health Promise – AHA Health News Alert, September 2007
Warmer temperatures don’t mean you need more salt – Sydney Morning Herald, October 2007
Parents scared children overeat salt – Science Alert, February 2008
Bitter truth about salt in sweet treats – Sunday Telegraph, February 2008
Beware the punch of salt – Sydney Morning Herald, June 2008.

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

Background

High blood pressure, which can be caused by diets too high in salt, currently consumes over 10% of the health budget. Extensive scientific evidence demonstrates that the government could save tens of thousand of lives and millions of dollars by implementing a national salt reduction program. A salt reduction program could be easily integrated into other government initiatives aimed at improving the Nation’s health.

Objectives

To encourage government to make salt a national priority area by:
✦ Leading efforts with the food industry to reduce salt, including agreement on salt targets for key products
✦ Funding a comprehensive social marketing campaign to raise consumer awareness
✦ Mandating for clearer food labels
✦ Ensuring sodium intake is measured reliably as part of the National Diet and Physical Activity Survey planned for 2010.

Approach

✦ Media and advocacy strategy
✦ Policy briefing paper on government interventions
✦ Program of meetings with key stakeholders
✦ Submissions to relevant government inquiries.

Progress to date

A series of meetings have been held with the Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Aging and government officials in Canberra.

Several media releases have been issued calling for government action.

A review of state health department action on health has been undertaken and meetings have been held with state representatives in New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland.
Submissions have been made to a number of government inquiries including:
- P230 and P1003 on Iodine Fortification in Australia.
- Government Inquiry into Obesity
- Kevin Rudd’s Australia 2020 Summit

Future plans
- Publish policy briefing
- Encourage, and where feasible, support state health departments to develop state salt reduction strategies
- Make a submission and seek a meeting with the National Preventative Health Task Force
- Submit paper for the Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council (AHMAC)

The NHMRC recommends a maximum daily intake of 6g of salt for adults (2300mg sodium)

RESEARCH AND MONITORING

Background
AWASH believes it is fundamental that effective ways of monitoring sodium intake are incorporated into the Government’s planned National Diet and Physical Activity Survey. It has also established its own program to monitor progress against objectives and inform strategy development.

Objectives
To monitor progress in relation to the AWASH objectives and strategies.

FIGURE 3: RESULTS FROM 2007 CONSUMER SURVEY

TABLE 2: SODIUM CONTENT OF VARIOUS BREAKFAST CEREALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product title</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Serving size</th>
<th>Sodium (mg/serve)</th>
<th>Sodium (mg/100g/mL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organic Bircher Muesli</td>
<td>450g</td>
<td>45g</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Puffed Rice</td>
<td>170g</td>
<td>14g</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full O’ Fruit Toasted Muesli</td>
<td>1kg</td>
<td>60g</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toasted Farmhouse</td>
<td>1kg</td>
<td>60g</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple, Date &amp; Almond Swing</td>
<td>500g</td>
<td>50g</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Berry Burst Muesli</td>
<td>500g</td>
<td>50g</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocoa Puffs</td>
<td>425g</td>
<td>30g</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn Flakes</td>
<td>500g</td>
<td>30g</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crunch Trim Malt Flavored</td>
<td>500g</td>
<td>30g</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey Crunch Cornflakes</td>
<td>450g</td>
<td>50g</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just Bran</td>
<td>425g</td>
<td>30g</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>1060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Approach
- Monitoring of salt levels in foods
- Regular consumer polls
- Ongoing media monitoring
- Tracking developments in government and stakeholder policy and action

Progress to date
A database has been established to monitor changes in the salt content of key processed foods over time.

Consumer polls have been published in May each year to track consumer understanding and behaviour.

Regular media monitoring (newspaper, TV and radio) is ongoing and a project has been established to monitor popular consumer magazine’s coverage of salt issues.

Government and stakeholder initiatives related to salt are being tracked.

Future plans
- Use database to report annually on changes in salt levels in processed foods
- Produce regular key findings document (following Sausage Sizzle report) to look at current levels and changes in salt levels in specific categories
- Continue annual consumer polls
- Partner with University of Sydney School of Public Health on TV monitoring project
FUNDING

The project is currently funded through a National Health and Medical Research Council Program Grant. AWASH has received additional funding from New South Wales Health and Sydney West Area Health Service to commission a review of the evidence to support proposals for a government action.

The Drop the Salt! campaign will be seeking additional funding from a range of government programs, trusts and corporations, to maintain and expand the project over the next three years. If you are interested in working in partnership with The George Institute on salt reduction or are aware of potential sources of funding for the project please contact the Secretariat on 02 9993 4520.

AWASH would like to acknowledge and thank the following organisations for their support:
- Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT)
- The Cancer Council NSW
- Choice
- CSIRO Human Nutrition
- Diabetes Australia NSW
- Dietitians Association of Australia
- The George Institute for International Health
- Healthy Kids School Canteen Association
- The Heart Research Institute
- High Blood Pressure Research Council
- H.J. Heinz Co Australia Ltd.
- Kidney Health Australia
- Ménière’s Support Group of NSW Inc.
- Ménière’s Support Group of Victoria Inc. (MSGV)
- Menzies Research Institute
- Monster Muesli
- National Heart Foundation of Australia
- National Stroke Foundation
- NSW School Canteens Association
- North Shore Hypertension Service
- Nutrition Physiology Research Centre, University of South Australia
- The Parents Jury Research Australia
- The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- Sydney University Nutrition Research Foundation
- Unilever Australasia

*Whilst not an official member of the advisory group, AWASH would also like to acknowledge the Australian Food and Grocery Council for its useful contribution to the project.

Companies that have made commitments to reduce salt in foods

Drop the Salt!
ABOUT THE GEORGE INSTITUTE

The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health is hosted by The George Institute for International Health, an internationally recognised organisation undertaking high impact research across a broad health landscape. As a leader in clinical trials, health policy and capacity-building, the Institute has a global network of top medical researchers backed by substantial expertise in research design, project management and data and statistical analysis. With a respected voice among global policy makers, the Institute has attracted significant funding support from governments, philanthropic organisations and corporations. George Institute research is regularly published in the top tier of academic journals internationally.

MISSION STATEMENT

The George Institute’s mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by providing the best research evidence to guide global health policy and by engaging with decision makers to enact change. Efforts are focused in Australia, Asia and the developing world where we will:

✦ Work with disadvantaged populations and focus on reducing inequity
✦ Lead large-scale regional capacity building research projects
✦ Strengthen health systems to improve control of common serious diseases and injuries.

This publication was written by the AWASH Secretariat. The Secretariat coordinates the day-to-day activities of AWASH and takes final responsibility for all outputs from AWASH. The Secretariat is informed by an Advisory Group which comprises a larger set of individuals with expertise in a range of different areas pertinent to the activities of AWASH.