

# DROP THE SALT!

## Interim Australian targets for sodium levels in 85 food categories

‘Challenging yet feasible’

**March 2011**

This document was prepared by researchers at The George Institute for Global Health

For further information please contact

**Jacqui Webster**

PO Box M201

Missenden Rd

Camperdown NSW, 2050

Australia

**Phone:** + 61 2 9993 4520

**Fax:** + 61 2 9993 4502

**Email:** [jwebster@georgeinstitute.org.au](mailto:jwebster@georgeinstitute.org.au)



THE GEORGE INSTITUTE  
*for International Health*

[www.awash.org.au](http://www.awash.org.au)  
[www.thegeorgeinstitute.org](http://www.thegeorgeinstitute.org)

## **BACKGROUND**

Many countries around the world are implementing strategies to reduce population salt consumption in recognition of the health benefits that will accrue. A key element to such programs is working with the food industry to reduce salt in processed foods and prepared meals. Agreeing maximum acceptable salt levels for major food categories is a required step that provides industry with targets to work towards.

The UK government was the first to establish such targets. A model was developed that calculated the proportion of salt that needed to be removed from each major food category to reduce average population salt consumption to an acceptable level. This model was then used as the basis for negotiating targets with the food industry while taking into account technical factors and consumer acceptance issues. The first set of targets for 80 food products were announced in March 2008 with subsequent revisions proposed for achievement in 2012.

The UK targets formed the basis for recent target setting processes in the US and Canada. The New York City Health Department first set targets for 85 categories of restaurant and processed foods and these have subsequently been adopted by the US National Salt Reduction Initiative. Likewise, the Canadian government has established category specific targets for over 150 Canadian food products and meals. Both countries started with the UK targets, mapped out the foods in their own markets and then consulted with the food industry to develop local targets. A key feature of each of these target setting processes is the short timeframe in which targets have been set, with a period of only about 12 months required to set 80 plus targets.

The Australian Food and Health Dialogue (FHD) was established to address Australia's diet-related disease burden through strategies to improve the nutrition of the population. The FHD was formed early in 2009 and formally announced in October of that year. Salt reduction and the setting of target levels for salt in food were identified as early priorities. To date, 18 months since its formal establishment, the FHD has set targets for only 2 food categories.

In parallel to the FHD other agencies have been working with industry to reduce the levels of salt in foods. The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) launched the Drop the Salt! campaign with support from the Australian Food and Grocery Council and individual food companies in May 2007 and has been systematically monitoring salt levels in processed foods each year since. The absence of clear targets for industry has been identified as a major impediment to progress and AWASH and the food industry have both highlighted to government the need for clear direction.

To address the current gap, we have used the data from our branded food composition database to set interim targets for the maximum acceptable levels of salt in 85 foods that contribute significant amounts of salt to the diets of Australians. Our approach to this is detailed below. As these targets are unlikely to be very different to the targets eventually established by the FHD we hope that the food industry will start working towards these targets now to significantly advance the process of reformulation in Australia so that it is in line with other countries. Reducing salt in processed and catered foods is the only effective way to reduce population salt intakes in Australia and clear targets for the food industry to work towards are a fundamental driver of this process.

## **Objective**

To establish interim targets indicating the maximum acceptable levels of sodium for major food categories that contribute significantly to salt in the Australian diet.

## **Approach**

A review of the target setting processes undertaken in other developed countries<sup>1-3</sup> was undertaken. Food categories that contribute importantly to salt in Australian diets were identified from prior reports.<sup>4-5</sup> Maximum acceptable levels of salt for Australia were then set by food category on the following basis:

1. The Food and Health Dialogue targets for bread and breakfast cereals were accepted as maximum targets
2. For all other product categories the UK FSA 2012 maximum targets were accepted where they existed and provided that between 10% and 50% of Australian products already met the target
3. If less than 10% or more than 50% of Australian products currently met the UK FSA 2012 target then a new target was deemed necessary. Accordingly, the target was set as the median salt level of products currently on the market in Australia
4. Where there was no UKFSA 2012 target, then the target was again set as the median salt level of products currently on the market in Australia

## **Key considerations**

The rationale for this approach was that we wished to have Australian salt targets that were challenging yet feasible. The UK targets had been set following an extensive period of consultation with the food industry in the UK. Therefore if more than 10% of products in Australia already met the UK target for a particular category then it was deemed to be feasible in Australia as well. If less than 10% of products on the market met the target for that category then it was felt the target was too stringent and that this was likely to reflect major technical challenges in the reformulation of the product category suggesting the target was unfeasible. Likewise if more than 50% already met the targets then it was felt it not be challenging enough. In either case, a new target was set at the median level of current sodium levels of that product on the market place. The underlying principle of setting the target at the median level of products currently in the marketplace was chosen on the basis that if 50% of products are already below this level then it is unlikely that there is a technical issue that would prevent the other 50% of products being reduced to similar levels. At the same time, if we could get a reduction in the salt levels of 50% of products this would be a very worthwhile public health achievement.

We also wished to build on the work done by others in Australia where it was clearly applicable. To this end we first reviewed the FHD targets in the broad context described immediately above. The bread targets fitted well within the 'challenging yet feasible' criteria set and so this was retained. The FHD breakfast cereal target on the other hand, did not meet these criteria – already more than 70% of breakfast cereals were below 400mg/100g and the FHD target for a 15% reduction in those few products currently above 400mg/100g was weak by comparison to

every other country studied. It was felt that at this stage the 400mg should be retained, but as a maximum target but that this should be revisited within 12 months in consultation with the food industry with the view that a new target should be set.

### **Results**

85 targets were set. The FHD target for bread(s) was retained and the target for breakfast cereals was accepted as a maximum target. In addition to these two FHD targets, 15 FSA targets were used and 63 new targets were set. The targets are shown in Table 1.

### **Next Steps**

- AWASH will be publishing these interim targets on its website and communicating them widely. It will be working closely with the food industry to support them to achieve these targets by 2013.
- If any product categories or targets are identified by food companies or other stakeholders as being unrealistic then AWASH will reconsider the evidence for that particular target and set new interim targets in consultation with the Food and Health Dialogue, as appropriate.
- AWASH will be advocating that the Food and Health Dialogue supports these targets as interim targets for food companies to work towards.
- AWASH will continue to monitor the progress of the food industry towards achieving these targets by producing annual reports based on information contained in our regularly updated food composition database.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Food Standards Agency. Proposals to revise the voluntary salt reduction targets. <http://www.food.gov.uk/consultations/ukwideconsults/2008/saltreductiontargets> (accessed 5th June 2010)(2009).
2. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. National Salt Reduction Initiative. (2010).
3. Health Canada. Stakeholder Consultation on Setting Sodium Reduction Targets for Canada. (Ottawa, 2011, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/consult/2011-sodium/consultation-eng.php>).
4. Webster, J.L., Dunford, E.K. & Neal, B.C. A systematic survey of the sodium contents of processed foods. *Am J Clin Nutr* 91, 413-420 (2010).
5. Dunford, E., Webster, J., Barzi, F. & Neal, B. Nutrient content of products served by leading Australian fast food chains. *Appetite* (2010).

## Proposed Sodium Targets for Australian Foods for 2013

Prepared by The George Institute

Food category	Description	Mean sodium content (mg/100g)	Source	Recommended maximum sodium level (mg/100g)
<b>BREAD AND BAKERY PRODUCTS</b>				
<b>Bread</b>				
White	Pre-packed white sliced bread	493	FHD	400
Whole-meal	Pre-packed wholemeal sliced bread	450	FHD	400
Mixed-grain	Pre-packed mixed grain or seed sliced bread	460	FHD	400
Fruit	Pre-packed fruit bread and fruit-based muffins/rolls	292	FHD	400
Flat	Pre-packed wraps and other flatbread products	470	FHD	400
Other	Turkish pide, bagels, English-style muffins, crumpets, pizza bases, other bread-based products	548	FHD	400
<b>Biscuits</b>				
Sweet, filled	Sweet filled biscuits	201	AWASH	170
Sweet, unfilled	Sweet unfilled biscuits	276	AWASH	270
Plain dry	Plain unflavoured crisp bread and crackers	605	AWASH	610
Savoury	Flavoured crisp bread and crackers	822	FSA	800
<b>Cakes, muffins and pastries</b>				
Cakes	Scones, pikelets, doughnuts, cakes, sweet buns, pancakes, crepes, slices and muffins	265	AWASH	240
Cake mixes	Cake, pikelet and pancake dry mixes	399	AWASH	360
Pastries	Plain and sweet pastry products (fresh, ambient and frozen)	295	AWASH	280
<b>CEREALS AND CEREAL PRODUCTS</b>				
Breakfast cereals (Ready To Eat)	Ready to eat breakfast cereals	212	FHD	400
Cereal bars	Cereal and nut-based bars	130	AWASH	100
<b>Noodles</b>				
Plain	Plain dry and fresh packet noodles	276	FSA	150
Flavoured	Flavoured dry packet noodles (including pot noodles)	399	AWASH	370
<b>Pasta</b>				
Canned	Canned and ambient pasta and sauce products (excludes frozen ready meals)	335	AWASH	330
Fresh	Packaged fresh filled and unfilled pasta	290	FSA	150
Packet	Savoury/flavoured dry pasta-based dishes	893	AWASH	970
Flavoured rice dishes	Savoury rice-based dishes	525	AWASH	400
Couscous side dishes	Plain and flavoured couscous	351	AWASH	300

## Proposed Sodium Targets for Australian Foods for 2013

Prepared by The George Institute

Food category	Description	Mean sodium content (mg/100g)	Source	Recommended maximum sodium level (mg/100g)
<b>CONVENIENCE FOODS</b>				
<b>Pizza</b>	Frozen and refrigerated pre-packed pizzas	393	AWASH	<b>390</b>
<b>Soup</b>	Canned, condensed, chilled, packet and ambient soup products	298	FSA	<b>290</b>
<b>Ready meals</b>	Frozen, chilled and ambient pre-prepared meals	283	AWASH	<b>280</b>
<b>DAIRY</b>				
<b>Cheese</b>				
<b>Hard</b>	Full and reduced fat hard cheeses such as cheddar/parmesan/Colby etc	724	AWASH	<b>660</b>
<b>Soft</b>	Soft cheeses such as cream cheese, ricotta and cottage cheese	493	FSA	<b>300</b>
<b>Processed</b>	Processed cheese slices and products	1262	FSA	<b>900</b>
<b>EDIBLE OILS AND EMULSIONS</b>				
<b>Regular butter</b>	Salted butters	495	AWASH	<b>480</b>
<b>Margarine</b>	Salted and unsalted margarines	388	AWASH	<b>360</b>
<b>Salt-reduced butter</b>	Salt-reduced butters	290	AWASH	<b>320</b>
<b>FAST FOOD</b>				
<b>Take-away pizza</b>	All take-away pizza products	530	AWASH	<b>530</b>
<b>Sandwiches</b>	Sandwiches (excludes burger-bun products)	431	AWASH	<b>410</b>
<b>Hamburgers</b>	Burger products (excluding sandwiches)	532	AWASH	<b>540</b>
<b>Chicken products</b>	Coated chicken products such as nuggets and chicken wings	663	AWASH	<b>650</b>
<b>French fries</b>	Salted and unsalted fries	270	AWASH	<b>260</b>
<b>FISH AND FISH PRODUCTS</b>				
<b>Canned fish</b>				
<b>Tuna</b>	Plain and flavoured canned tuna	384	AWASH	<b>390</b>
<b>Salmon</b>	Plain and flavoured canned salmon	406	AWASH	<b>430</b>
<b>Sardines</b>	Plain and flavoured canned sardines	349	AWASH	<b>360</b>
<b>Other canned fish</b>	Plain and flavoured mackerel, herring, kipper, oysters, shellfish	444	AWASH	<b>420</b>
<b>Frozen fish</b>	Coated and uncoated frozen fish products	371	AWASH	<b>350</b>

## Proposed Sodium Targets for Australian Foods for 2013

Prepared by The George Institute

Food category	Description	Mean sodium content (mg/100g)	Source	Recommended maximum sodium level (mg/100g)
<b>FRUIT AND VEGETABLES</b>				
<b>Vegetables</b>				
<b>Canned vegetables</b>				
Tomato	Canned tomato products	115	FSA	<b>50</b>
Legumes	Canned beans (excluding baked beans in sauce) and peas	264	AWASH	<b>280</b>
Baked beans	Baked beans in tomato sauce (with and without additions)	340	FSA	<b>300</b>
Corn	Canned creamed, plain and sweet corn	170	AWASH	<b>150</b>
Other canned vegetables	Other canned vegetables	263	AWASH	<b>280</b>
Pickled vegetables	Pickled vegetable and olive products	978	AWASH	<b>780</b>
Frozen potato products	Frozen potato-based products	225	AWASH	<b>200</b>
Salted nuts	Salted nuts and seeds	363	AWASH	<b>340</b>
<b>MEAT AND MEAT PRODUCTS</b>				
<b>Processed meat</b>				
Bacon	Pre-packed bacon products	1259	AWASH	<b>1210</b>
Sausages	Beef, pork, chicken and lamb sausages	783	AWASH	<b>650</b>
Hotdogs	Chilled hotdog and frankfurt products	1050	AWASH	<b>1150</b>
Sliced meat	Pre-packaged sliced meat (excluding salami and other cured meats)	1054	AWASH	<b>1030</b>
Salami	Pre-packaged salami and other cured meats (e.g. prosciutto)	1397	AWASH	<b>1400</b>
Meat burgers	Beef, pork, chicken and lamb meat burgers	565	FSA	<b>300</b>
Canned meat	Canned meat products (excluding canned ready meals)	620	AWASH	<b>540</b>
Meat with pastry	Frozen meat pies, sausage rolls and other meat-based pastry products	486	FSA	<b>450</b>
<b>Meat alternatives</b>				
Tofu	Plain and flavoured tofu products	153	AWASH	<b>120</b>
Meat free products	Meat-free products excluding tofu and meat-free bacon	494	AWASH	<b>480</b>
<b>SAUCES AND SPREADS</b>				
<b>Sauces</b>				
<b>Table sauces</b>				
Tomato sauce	Tomato sauces and ketchups	989	FSA	<b>730</b>
Chilli sauce	Sweet chilli and chilli sauces	1700	AWASH	<b>1600</b>

## Proposed Sodium Targets for Australian Foods for 2013

Prepared by The George Institute

Food category	Description	Mean sodium content (mg/100g)	Source	Recommended maximum sodium level (mg/100g)
<b>Barbecue sauce</b>	BBQ sauces	881	FSA	<b>600</b>
<b>Steak/Worcestershire</b>	Steak, HP and Worcestershire sauces	991	FSA	<b>600</b>
<b>Asian sauces</b>	Soy, fish, oyster and other high-salt Asian sauces	4640	AWASH	<b>4840</b>
<b>Mustard</b>	Mustard products	1870	AWASH	<b>1910</b>
<b>Marinade</b>	Marinade products	1715	AWASH	<b>1600</b>
<b>Tomato paste</b>	Plain and flavoured tomato paste products	468	AWASH	<b>550</b>
<b>Meal-based sauces</b>				
<b>Powdered</b>	Asian and Indian flavoured powdered sauces	5167	AWASH	<b>5060</b>
<b>Ambient</b>	Asian and Indian flavoured ambient sauces	595	AWASH	<b>490</b>
<b>Liquid</b>	Asian and Indian flavoured liquid sauces	1162	FSA	<b>800</b>
<b>Pasta sauce</b>	Ambient and fresh pasta sauces	486	AWASH	<b>450</b>
<b>Curry paste</b>	Curry pastes	2157	AWASH	<b>1810</b>
<b>Gravy</b>	Liquid and powdered gravies	527	AWASH	<b>540</b>
<b>Stock</b>	Liquid and powdered stock	593	AWASH	<b>340</b>
<b>MAYONNAISE AND DRESSINGS</b>				
<b>Mayonnaise</b>	Full and low-fat mayonnaise	651	AWASH	<b>650</b>
<b>Dressings</b>	Oil, vinegar and other types of salad dressing	931	AWASH	<b>940</b>
<b>SPREADS</b>				
<b>Peanut butter</b>	Salted and unsalted peanut butter	394	AWASH	<b>440</b>
<b>Relishes</b>	Relishes, chutneys and pickles	625	AWASH	<b>460</b>
<b>Yeast extract</b>	Yeast extract spreads such as vegemite	2939	AWASH	<b>3100</b>
<b>Dips</b>	Chilled and ambient dips and salsa	446	AWASH	<b>410</b>
<b>SNACK FOODS</b>				
<b>Potato crisps</b>	Plain and flavoured potato crisps (excluding salt and vinegar)	634	AWASH	<b>600</b>
<b>Salt and vinegar crisps and snacks</b>	Salt and vinegar flavoured snack foods	1020	AWASH	<b>1000</b>
<b>Extruded snacks</b>	Extruded snacks (e.g. cheesy snacks; excluding salt and vinegar)	1024	FSA	<b>1000</b>
<b>Corn chips</b>	Plain and flavoured corn chips	577	AWASH	<b>560</b>
<b>Snack packs</b>	All kinds of cracker-based snack packs	716	AWASH	<b>620</b>

### **Targets were set as follows**

1. The Food and Health Dialogue target for bread was set for all bread products and the 400mg/100g level for breakfast cereals retained as an upper maximum
2. For all other product categories UKFSA 2012 maximum targets were accepted wherever there was a target set and between 10% and 50% of Australian products met the target
3. Where <10% or >50% of products met the UKFSA 2012 target then the target was set as the median value of current Australian products in that category
4. Where there was no UKFSA 2012 target or FHD target, targets were set as the median value of the current product range in Australia

### **Notes**

- All targets were rounded to the nearest 10mg/100g
- There may be occasional legitimate exceptions to the maximum targets for some products that are uniquely dependent upon high salt levels
- Targets were not set for the following product categories where mean sodium levels were consistently low: dairy (milk, yoghurt, cream and ice cream), fruit (dried fruit, fruit in juice/syrup, fruit bars etc), frozen vegetables
- Under "source", 'FHD' = Food and Health Dialogue, 'FSA' = UK Food Standards Agency and 'AWASH' is the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health
- Mean and median sodium values were obtained from The George Institute's 2010 Food Composition Database