

DROP THE SALT!

Interim Australian targets for sodium levels in 85 food categories

‘Challenging yet feasible’

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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 countries¹⁻³ was undertaken. Food categories that contribute importantly to salt in Australian diets were identified from prior reports.⁴⁻⁵ 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).
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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)
BREAD AND BAKERY PRODUCTS				
Bread				
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
Biscuits				
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
Cakes, muffins and pastries				
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
CEREALS AND CEREAL PRODUCTS				
Breakfast cereals (Ready To Eat)	Ready to eat breakfast cereals	212	FHD	400
Cereal bars	Cereal and nut-based bars	130	AWASH	100
Noodles				
Plain	Plain dry and fresh packet noodles	276	FSA	150
Flavoured	Flavoured dry packet noodles (including pot noodles)	399	AWASH	370
Pasta				
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

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

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

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

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