

Media Release

Australians smart on salt but slow to act

15 May 2007

New consumer research has found that, while most Australians know too much salt is bad for health, they are not doing much about it. These and other key findings will be announced at the launch of 'The Drop the Salt!' campaign in Sydney today.

The new survey, commissioned by the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH), shows that most Australians are 'salt smart', recognising that most salt comes from processed foods. The majority were also aware that salt can cause high blood pressure and serious illnesses. However, few were regularly checking labels for salt content and even fewer were acting on what they found.

According to AWASH Chair, Dr Bruce Neal, not nearly enough is being done to reduce salt in people's diets and Australians are consuming far too much. "Most Australians are eating well above the 6 grams per day recommended by the National Heart Foundation of Australia. It is not well understood that almost everyone's health is being adversely affected by the salt they eat," he said.

Around 75% of salt in the diet comes from processed foods, so the food industry has a key role to play. Whilst many Australian companies have already made real improvements to the salt content of their products, more still needs to be done. The 'Drop the Salt!' campaign is the first cohesive national salt reduction effort in Australia. The five-year campaign unites a broad range of organisations in a commitment to reduce salt intake in the Australian population to 6 grams a day by 2012. This would be expected to prevent about one fifth of all strokes and heart attacks in Australia each year. "This is now probably the most cost-effective possible approach to vascular disease prevention in Australia," said Dr Neal.

AWASH will work with industry to try and reduce the amount of salt in processed foods by a quarter, and to get the catering industry to take out a similar amount out of takeaway foods. There will be a concurrent consumer awareness campaign and advocacy for new food labelling that makes the salt content of foods really clear.

The salt reduction campaign already has the support of leaders in the medical profession and the food industry. Professor Stephen Harrap, President of the High Blood Pressure Research Council said, "Excess salt consumed throughout life causes blood pressure to rise with age. There is strong evidence that reducing salt consumption could lower blood pressure and reduce the risks of heart attack and stroke for most Australians."

"I believe the food industry has a key role to play in reducing the salt intake of the population," said Chairman of Unilever Australasia, Peter Slator. "Improving the nutritional value of our products is at the heart of Unilever's business. We have been reducing salt for several decades now and are committed to further action."

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Notes to editors:

1. This press release has been issued by the AWASH Secretariat, which 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 group of individuals with expertise in a range of different areas pertinent to the activities of AWASH.
2. The Drop the Salt! Campaign launch and networking lunch will be chaired by Catherine Saxelby, nutritionist and food writer. It will take place at 11am at the Kerry Packer Education Centre, Camperdown, Sydney. Copies of the consumer research and further information about the Drop the Salt! Campaign will be available at the launch. Please see attached program for further details.
3. The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) is a growing network of individuals and organisations concerned with salt and its effects on health. 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 cardiovascular diseases and other salt-related health problems. Visit www.awash.org.au for more information and for a full list of our advisors and supporters.
4. AWASH will be working to Drop the Salt! by promoting the benefits of salt reduction and engaging the participation of all sectors of the Australian community - this will include industry, schools, consumers, scientists, healthcare workers, governments, regulatory bodies and professional organisations. Regular monitoring of progress towards the goal and careful scrutiny of the development of each strategy will be undertaken throughout the campaign.
5. WASH - In 2006, around 194 medical experts from 48 countries around the world joined together to launch WASH – World Action on Salt and Health – in a concerted effort to reduce dietary salt intake, in order to lower blood pressure globally. AWASH is building on the success of the UK campaign. www.worldactiononsalt.com