

New research links salt intake to childhood obesity

Media Release

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New evidence released today suggests that children who eat low-salt diets reduce their risk of obesity. The findings were released in *Hypertension and* announced by the American Heart Association. Researchers reported that children, who eat lots of salt drink more fluids, typically sugar sweetened soft drinks with high calories.

The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) welcomed this new evidence highlighting the importance of reducing salt in children's diets. AWASH Chair, Dr Bruce Neal, Senior Director at The George Institute said, "It's vital that parents realise that most children are eating much more salt than is recommended. In addition to being a health risk in its own right, we now see that this is causing childhood obesity. Much of the salt children consume is 'hidden' in their favourite foods such as bread, breakfast cereals, processed meats and pizzas."

Over 1,600 boys and girls' aged 4 to 18 years had their salt and fluid intakes recorded over a seven day period, weighing all food and drink consumed. The UK researchers estimated the daily decline in calorie intake when a child's salt and subsequent soft drink consumption is reduced.

"If children cut their salt intake by half (an average reduction of 3 grams a day), there would be a decrease of approximately two sugar sweetened soft drinks per week per child, so each child would decrease calorie intake by almost 250 kcal per week. Not only would reducing salt intake lower blood pressure in children, but it could also play a role in helping to reduce obesity and the risk of cardiovascular disease as an adult," said author Dr. He at St George's University of London, England.

Last month's food industry debate, hosted by The George Institute and including health professionals, dieticians and medical experts, called for a concerted approach from Government, to address this national health risk along with its efforts to reduce childhood obesity.

AWASH, which coordinates the Drop the Salt! Campaign, says that salt reduction is an extremely cost-effective prevention strategy. According to Dr Neal, "A comprehensive government strategy, including setting targets for salt levels in foods and raising awareness of the maximum recommended intake levels for children, is urgently required. If Australians reduced their salt intake to recommended levels, we would prevent about one fifth of all strokes and heart attacks in Australia each year. And with this new evidence today, we also know that we can also reduce the incidence of childhood obesity."

For the remainder of 2008, AWASH will:

- Consult with the food industry on a five year strategy to reduce salt in processed foods, particularly those eaten by children
- Meet with State and Federal Government Health Departments to discuss how best to improve consumer understanding on salt issues
- Promote the need for a high profile forum to consider front of pack labelling.

The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommend a maximum upper level of 3.5g salt per day for 4-8 year olds, and 5g for 9-13 year olds. However, adding up the salt content of a typical child's meals and snacks for a day shows it would be very easy to consume over twice this amount.

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Notes to editors:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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
4. *Reference:
Geleijnse JM, Hofman A, Witteman JC, Hazebroek AA, Valkenburg HA, Grobbee DE. Long-term effects of neonatal sodium restriction on blood pressure. *Hypertension* 1997;29:913–17. (Erratum appeared in *Hypertension* 1997;29:1211.)
5. CONTACT: For journal copies, please call: (214) 706-1396 or visit www.jhypertension.com/ from 4pm US EST Wednesday 20 February, 2008. AHA media team can be contacted on: Karen Astle: (214) 706-1392; Cathy Lewis: (214) 706-1324; Julie Del Barto (broadcast): (214) 706-1330