

Clearer food labels the answer to low salt diets

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Australians may be aware that too much salt in their diet leads to health problems but most do not understand how to work out the salt content from the nutrition labels.

The results of the latest consumer poll commissioned by the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) will be announced by AWASH Coordinator, Jacqui Webster, at the Dietitians Association of Australia's Annual Meeting on the Gold Coast on Friday. The poll revealed that, whilst the majority of Australian consumers check food content labels at least some of the time, most (60%) don't understand what the sodium content listed in the Nutrition Information Panel actually means.

Dr Caryl Nowson, Professor of Nutrition and Ageing at Deakin University and member of AWASH advisory group, said this latest poll clearly shows that consumers are confused by food labels. "It's madness for scientific jargon to be used on the back of foods. We need food labels to contain sensible and clear information that everyone can understand."

Dr Nowson continued, "The food content labels on Australian packaged foods are too complicated. Listing salt instead of sodium would be a good start, but we really need to go a step further. Consumers usually choose which foods to purchase very quickly and only a labeling system that is really quick and easy to understand will help."

The Food Standards Agency in the UK is a world leader in salt reduction and is conducting extensive research into the optimal food labeling system. The Australian government is also considering this issue. According to AWASH Chair and Senior Director at The George Institute for International Health, Dr Bruce Neal, "A government decision about a standard front-of-pack labeling system can't come quickly enough. With epidemics of high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes all caused by poor food choices we simply have to take action. Consumers deserve to be able to tell at a glance whether the food they are buying is healthy or not."

The AWASH survey also showed that consumer awareness about the harmful effects of salt on health has not improved. "Unfortunately this is not surprising," said Dr Neal. "The health problems caused by salt just haven't made it onto the radar of enough people able to effect change. Some parts of the food industry are making an effort but governments (both State and Federal) need to take concerted action to address this public health priority".

Salt is the leading cause of high blood pressure in most countries around the world, and high blood pressure causes more deaths than anything else. 'We have really effective programs in place for controlling problems like tobacco, we have got to get something in place for salt' said Dr Neal.

AWASH is leading a five year Drop the Salt! Campaign, the first time a cohesive national salt reduction effort has been undertaken in Australia. Now in its second year, the campaign will advocate strongly for better food labeling practices. Only then can Australians begin to take responsibility for reducing their daily salt intake to the recommended 6 grams a day.

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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. The results of the consumer poll will be announced by AWASH Senior Project Manager Jacqui Webster at the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) Annual Meeting on the Gold Coast on Friday. For other media releases around research being presented at the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) conference, go to the Media Centre at the DAA website: www.daa.asn.au or contact Maree Garside at the DAA on 0408 482 581
4. 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
5. In Australia, the following nutrients must be included on the Nutrition Information Panel of packaged foods products: Energy, protein, fat (total and saturated), carbohydrate (total and sugars) and sodium.
6. The Recommended Upper Limits (UL) for sodium according to the Nutrient Reference Values for Australia and New Zealand are as follows:

Age	Recommended Upper Daily Limit (g salt)
1–3 yr	2.5
4–8 yr	3.5
9–13 yr	5
14–18 yr	5.75
Men	6
Women	6

7. A high salt intake can lead to or worsen many chronic conditions including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, stomach cancer and asthma. See AWASH website www.awash.org.au for further details.