

UK salt campaign may have successfully reduced salt intake, but what are the next steps?

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The UK Food Standards Agency's (FSA) salt campaign may have successfully reduced salt intakes by about 10% by raising public awareness of salt as a public health issue and encouraging product reformulation. This is the conclusion of a recent study undertaken by researchers of the University of Reading, University of Bologna and University of London as part of the EU project [EATWELL](#) (Interventions to Promote Healthy Eating Habits: Evaluation and Recommendations) which assessed healthy eating interventions.

Evidence has shown that a high salt intake is a major contributor to elevated blood pressure in some individuals. Elevated blood pressure is the most important risk factor for cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death worldwide. A target of no more than 6 g salt per day was, therefore, recommended by the UK's Committee on Medical aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy in 1994 and further endorsed in 2003 by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. This recommendation also applies throughout Europe (Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers).

In 2004, the FSA launched a salt campaign to tackle the public health issue of high salt intake in the UK. The campaign had two key strategies; first an awareness campaign, using advertisements, to inform the public of the dangers of too much salt, and second, working with the food industry to encourage product reformulation. Both of these tactics were reported as successful. Within a year, public awareness of recommended salt intake limits increased from 3% to 34% and within three years, salt content of processed foods sold in supermarkets was reduced by 20%-30%. More importantly the FSA reported a 10% reduction in actual salt intake, although there has been some dispute over the effectiveness of public policy in influencing salt intake. Indeed, other factors could have contributed to the reduction, such as changes in food prices. Shankar and colleagues aimed to understand the true effect of the campaign by examining the trend in urinary sodium (an indirect marker of salt intake) whilst also controlling for socio-economic characteristics and relative prices. Their findings support the FSA's assertion that its campaign resulted in a 10% reduction in intake.

The apparent success of the FSA salt campaign is promising. The strategy to encourage product reformulation appears to have been beneficial and a recently struck deal aims to take this further. The UK Secretary of States 2012 Responsibility Deal on Public Health recognises that achieving the salt intake goal of no more than 6 g per day will necessitate action across the whole industry, Government, non-governmental organisations and individuals. In this deal, food manufacturers and retailers have committed to further reformulate a range of food products to continue to reduce salt content.

This will not only require established techniques to reduce salt content but also the development of new ones which do not diminish flavour or cause food safety issues for certain foods. Existing ingredients and technologies are being used successfully in certain commercial products, however, these aren't necessarily



suitable for other products. Particular foods, such as bread, cheese and cakes, pose a significant problem. If salt content is to be further reduced, new ingredients or technologies must be explored.

As a result, the Food and Drink Federation and British Retail Consortium commissioned Leatherhead Food Research to investigate ways to reduce salt in foods. In their report, Leatherhead Food Research outlines potential solutions and concludes that, although they are out there, no simple solution exists for the difficult food categories. They caution that we cannot assume the same formulation or technology can be used for all products of a particular category but, rather, each manufacturer should seek a solution for their own formulation and processing conditions, verifying the sensory, safety, labelling and cost issues of the finished product. It may, therefore, be some time before total solutions are available commercially.

More information

[Shankar B, et al. \(2012\) An evaluation of the UK Food Standards Agency's salt campaign. Health Economics.](#)

[Leatherhead Food Research \(2012\) Evaluation of Technical Approaches to Salt reduction. Commissioned by the Food and Drink Federation and the British Retail Consortium.](#)

EATWELL project website: www.eatwellproject.eu