



Salt reduction

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) recently published an updated version of its voluntary salt reduction programme. We track the progress so far.

The recommended dietary allowance for salt in adults is four grams per day, which would add up to one and a half kilos per year per adult. Our annual intake of salt is worrying: it is, on average, more than twice the recommended allowance. According to Prof Alan Reilly, Chief Executive of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI, see *Useful contacts*), "The figures in relation to the average person's intake of salt are alarming. On average, the Irish adult consumes 9.56 grams of salt per day, which adds up to 3.5 kilograms of salt in one year alone."

The FSAI has been working with the food industry since 2003 to achieve universal reductions in the salt content of processed and prepared foods. The initial goal was to reduce the average population intake of salt from 10g (grams) a day to 6g a day by 2010. However this deadline has now been extended to 2012 following consultation with the food industry.

Eighty percent of dietary sodium tends to come from processed foods, with the remainder from salt added in while cooking and at the table, and from naturally occurring sodium in foods. The two major problems manufacturers say they encounter when it comes to reducing sodium content are that firstly, they must make the reductions while simultaneously ensuring that the taste of their product remains acceptable to their customers. And secondly, they have to find a way to replace salt's functions, for example as a preservative.

Our taste buds have become so used to the taste of salt in many foods that some people complain that food is bland without it. However there is no reason to suggest that our taste buds cannot adjust to foods containing less salt. The food industry is making efforts to reduce sodium, and new ingredients and new technology are currently being researched and developed in the search for alternatives.

Programme update

The latest updates on the on-going salt reduction programme are detailed on www.fsai.ie in the report entitled 'FSAI Salt Reduction Programme - Written Achievements and Undertakings by the Food Industry: Update Period August 2009 - August 2010'. Salt reduction programmes are currently underway in foods across all of the following product categories: bread and biscuits, meat products, soups, sauces and condiments, breakfast cereal, sandwiches, snacks, dairy products, non-dairy yellow fat spreads and ready meals. There are 72 registered companies in the programme, but ten of these are not actively involved with updates at present. Five companies have ceased involvement by correspondence with FSAI or failed to respond to FSAI letters for two consecutive years. The authority acknowledges a waning of interest, which it attributes to difficulties caused by the current difficulties in the economy. A number of manufacturing highlights are

AT A GLANCE

Programme update.

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Salt variations.

SALT CONTENT

Food category		Product	Salt (g per 100g)
Baked Beans	High	Tesco Value Baked Beans	1.3
	Low	Tesco Light Choice Baked Beans	0.3
Cheese Slices	High	Aldi Bishop's Land 10 Cheddar Cheese Singles	3.5
	Low	Calvita Cheese Singles/Tesco Value Singles/Kerry Low Low Singles	2.8
Cornflakes	High	Kellogg's Cornflakes	1.8
	Low	Aldi Harvest Moon Cornflakes	0.65
Ketchup	High	Heinz Tomato Ketchup	3.1
	Low	Tesco Value Ketchup	0.9
Packet Soup	High	Aldi Soupreme Country Vegetable	10.5
	Low	Erin Farmhouse Vegetable	6.83
Rice Cereal	High	Kellogg's Rice Krispies	1.65
	Low	Aldi Crisp Rice Cereal	0.3
Sausages	High	Dunnes Stores Traditional Style Jumbo Sausages	2.4
	Low	Marks and Spencers Premium Pork Sausages	1.15
Soda Bread	High	Duggs Irish Soda Bread (in Aldi)	2.25
	Low	Irish Pride Buttermilk Soda (in Lidl)	1.0

Information correct as at 8 October 2009.

NUTRITIONAL CRITERIA ¹

	Green (low)	Amber (medium)	Red (high)
Salt	≤0.30g/100g	>0.30 to ≤1.50g/100g	>1.50g/100g

¹ UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) nutritional criteria for traffic light signpost labelling.

outlined in the update as follows:

- A sandwich manufacturer reported that 75% of its sandwiches were below the target of 2.4g salt per pack.
- A meat products manufacturer reported that 72% of its meat products were already at 2010 sodium targets.
- A processed food manufacturer reported that all of its product categories will meet targets by 2010 including iconic brands like Baked Beans and Tomato Ketchup.
- Snack manufacturers reported extensive salt reductions in crisps, snacks and popcorn while one manufacturer has already achieved between 24% and 58% sodium reductions across its product range.
- The Irish Dairy Industries Association, representing spreads and butter manufacturers, joined the salt reduction programme and submitted undertakings to reduce salt in spreads and butter by 10% and 5% by 2010.

FSAI requests

We noted that a number of specific requests for future changes are made of certain businesses and organisations in the FSAI Comments section of the Salt

Reduction Programme Update Report:

- **Food and Drink Industry Ireland (FDII), and the IBEC Meat Sector Group, representing Dawn Farms, Breco Foods, Kepak Convenience Foods, Kerry Foods, AIBP, Granby Ltd, Rosderra Irish Meats, and Dawn Pork and Bacon.** The FSAI wants the industry to adopt a maximum target for rashers of 1,300mg sodium/100g. The FSAI will carry out a survey of processed meats in 2009 to assess progress since 2004.
- **Irish Breakfast Cereal Association (IBCA) representing Kellogg's, Nestle Cereals, Weetabix and Flahavan's.** The FSAI would like to see further salt reductions in rice-based cereals and cereal-based snacks. The FSAI will raise these issues with the IBCA before the end of 2009.
- **Irish Dairy Industry Association (IDIA)** The FSAI continues to urge the IDIA to adopt proposed targets of max 0.5g sodium/100g butter and 0.5g sodium/100g spreads for 2010.
- **Tesco Ireland Own Brands: Tesco Value, Tesco Healthy Living, Tesco Finest, Tesco Organic.** The FSAI would like to see salt reductions in all Tesco

bread lines in the coming year.

Benefits of salt reduction

Salt is of course a vital nutrient and it is necessary for the body to function. It is needed in very small amounts in the diet for maintaining water balance, healthy blood pressure and healthy muscles and nerves. However, most people's daily intake remains too high and this brings with it potential health risks including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and stroke. A recent study undertaken in London and published in the journal *Hypertension* (see *Useful contacts*) demonstrates that a lower salt intake results in significant reductions in blood pressure. The study was conducted among people from three ethnic groups – whites, blacks and Asians – and the beneficial reductions in blood pressure were noticed in all three groups. The study supports the current recommendations to lower salt consumption to less than six grams per day for adults. The salt intake of the study participants was reduced from 9.7 to 6.5 grams per day and researchers noted a reduced average blood pressure from 146/91 to 141/88 mmHg within six weeks. "The study demonstrates that a modest reduction in salt intake, as currently recommended, causes significant and important falls in BP in all three ethnic groups of individuals with mildly raised BP," the researchers said of their findings.

Mandatory action

The authors of a study published earlier this year in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* said that Governments should use regulation to reduce sodium consumption as the food industry is not doing enough. Their policy recommendations for slashing sodium intake include mandating simple, easy-to-understand labelling of sodium on all food products, initiating public education campaigns, and setting timelines for sodium reduction. However, the authors wrote that an approach based on regulation and partnership between the food industry and government is likely to be more effective. This idea is based on Finnish experience, which has seen sodium consumption and blood pressure decrease following a plan "anchored on partnership and regulation of the food industry and consumer education via mass media." The authors of the study said: "Although voluntary

action by the food industry may be the preferred option to initiate sodium reduction, its absence calls for governments to use their regulatory capacity to bring about change.”

Cereal worry

In the UK, the government target is to reduce the average adult salt consumption to 6g a day by 2010. The Food Standards Agency (FSA, see *Useful contacts*) has planned a TV and radio advertisement campaign on salt in cereals and other food products. However, the Association of Cereal Food Manufacturers (ACFM, see *Useful contacts*), which represents Kellogg's, Weetabix and Cereal Partners in the UK, has urged the FSA not to go ahead with the £3m campaign. Kellogg's regional corporate affairs director for Europe, Chris Wermann, said: “We don't believe it's appropriate, considering the volume of salt we actually deliver to the UK diet.” The ACFM said cereal brands have succeeded in lowering the average amount of salt in their products by 44% since 1998.

Food manufacturers may have been increasing their efforts to cut the salt content of cereals, but according to a recent *Which?* report, many cereals still contain more salt than is acceptable. For example, the report found that 100g of Tesco Special Flakes contains the same amount of salt as 100g of Walkers Ready Salted crisps. The FSA has said that it does not intend to cancel the campaign and is not laying all the blame on cereal manufacturers, but that the campaign is aimed at all foods containing salt and is about promoting healthier options.

Salt variations in foods

Consumer Choice examined the sodium content in different brands across the following eight food categories; Baked Beans, Cheese Slices, Cornflakes, Ketchup, Packet Soup, Rice Cereal, Sausages and Soda Bread. There were notable differences between salt levels in the various brands. We found that cornflakes, for example, ranged in sodium content from 1.8g per 100g (Kellogg's Cornflakes) to 0.65g per 100g (Aldi Harvest Moon Cornflakes). Staying with cereal comparisons we found that Kellogg's once again had a lot more salt in their Rice Krispies - 1.65g per 100g - than Aldi's Crisp Rice Cereal which has 0.3g of salt per 100g. The salt levels in ketchup ranged from 3.1g per 100g

(Heinz Tomato Ketchup) down to 0.9g per 100g (Tesco Value Ketchup). The salt levels in packet soup were very high across the board and ranged from 10.5g per 100g in Aldi Soupreme Country Vegetable to 6.83g per 100g in Erin Farmhouse Vegetable. Marks and Spencers Premium Pork Sausages, at 1.15g of salt per 100g, have less than half the amount that Dunnes Stores Traditional Style Jumbo Sausages contain - 2.4g per 100g. And finally, Duggs Irish Soda Bread, which we spotted in Aldi, has 2.25g of salt per 100g while Irish Pride Buttermilk Soda, which is sold in Lidl, is made with less than half of this amount with 1g of salt per 100g. This is not an exhaustive list and there may be other brands with higher or lower levels of salt than the ones we found through our own research. We were disappointed to note that more than half of the products we looked at had high levels of salt under the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) nutritional criteria for traffic light signpost labelling. The rest had medium levels of salt but none were low in salt.

The food industry must intensify its

SALT VERSUS SODIUM

To convert sodium to salt:
1g sodium = 2.5g of salt

To convert salt to sodium:
1g salt = 0.4g sodium.

efforts to reduce the amount of salt in its products if it has not already done so. Many food manufacturers have already begun to do this and it is clear that many companies can and do make foods using less salt than their competitors. This indicates that it is possible to reduce sodium without compromising on taste or on salt's function as a preservative in food. If some companies can do it, why can't the rest follow suit?

Reducing salt in your diet

The best way to reduce your sodium intake is to eat more fresh foods and less canned and processed foods. When you begin to reduce your intake you may think that food tastes too bland. It takes a while to adjust but after a few weeks you will get used to less salty foods. Other sodium-reducing tips include:

- Check food labels for salt content and opt for the products with the lowest levels.
- Rinse canned vegetables to remove extra salt.
- Choose fresh meat and fish rather than salted products such as ham, sausages and smoked products.
- Use alternatives such as pepper, garlic, herbs and spices when cooking.
- Taste your food before adding salt both at home and when eating out.
- Remember instant soups, gravy powder, stock cubes and soy sauce all contain salt so use these sparingly.

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Useful contacts

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ACFM
www.breakfastcereal.org

Canadian Medical Association Journal
www.cmaj.ca

FSA
www.food.gov.uk

Hypertension
www.hyper.ahajournals.org

Report by
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choice comment

A lower intake of salt in the longterm could play an important role for many people in the prevention of cardiovascular disease, renal disease and osteoporosis. However, getting sodium intake down to recommended levels is clearly a major undertaking and it may be time to move to a legislative solution. Support from food manufacturers, restaurants and takeaway outlets is crucial for the FSAI to ensure its targets can be reached. The organisation has called for more food businesses to get involved and to recommit to the salt reduction programme. Manufacturers must prioritise consumer health as they continue to develop products for the food market and ensure that food labelling is clear. They have a responsibility to work with the health sector to make healthier food choices the easier choices to make. As the saying goes: ‘A lot done, a lot more to do.’

Consumers should vote with their feet and choose the lowest-salt products available on the market. Another way to start reducing your salt intake is to prepare more food at home, starting with fresh ingredients as often as possible. Then you retain control over what you add or take away.