Government salt reduction initiative needed

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A government led national salt reduction strategy is needed for New Zealand, according to a new study from the University of Auckland.

Co-author, Dr Helen Eyles from the University's National Institute for Health Innovation, says increased action is needed across the whole food supply.

"We need to see a greater focus on food categories with sodium levels that have shown minimal change or that have increased since 2003," says Dr Eyles. "Especially in food categories that are leading sources of sodium in our diet."

"This is essential if New Zealand is to meet its commitment to a 30 percent relative reduction in population sodium intake by 2025."

Dr Eyles says that successes in the United Kingdom and Australia show that a Government-led national salt reduction strategy should now be considered for New Zealand.

"Such a strategy should include targets for manufacturers, but also improved labelling and a public awareness campaign highlighting the impact of salt on health," she says.

The study paper, 'Changes in the sodium content of New Zealand processed foods: 2003-2013', published in scientific journal, *Nutrients*, looks at how sodium levels in processed foods have changed between 2003 and 2013.

The joint research from the University of Auckland's National Institute for Health Innovation and the Heart Foundation shows food companies are making some progress in reducing sodium (salt) levels, but much more work is needed for New Zealand to meet global targets.

New Zealanders' salt intake is currently around 9g/day, similar to many other western countries, but well short of the World Health Organisation's target of 5g/day by 2025.

"Limiting salt consumption is important because a high intake can cause high blood pressure which is a major risk factor for heart disease," says Dr Eyles.

New Zealand has committed to a 30 percent relative reduction in salt intake by 2025 as part of the United Nations agreement.

"Around 75 percent of the salt in our diets comes from processed foods,

so reducing sodium levels in the food supply is essential for lowering population sodium intakes," she says.

Analysis was carried out across nine food groups, including bread; breakfast cereals; butter, margarine and dairy blends; canned corned beef; canned salmon; canned spaghetti; canned vegetables; cheese; and crackers.

Improvements were made in seven of the nine categories with the biggest reductions in breakfast cereals (28 percent), canned spaghetti (15 percent) and bread (14 percent). The improvement in breakfast cereals is the result of large sodium reductions in children's cereals.

"It is positive to see progress in the bread and breakfast cereal categories, given these are low-cost staple foods for many families," says co-author Dave Monro from the Heart Foundation.

"Bread, for example, is the leading source of salt in the New Zealand diet, accounting for around a quarter of our salt intake. It's encouraging to see the sodium content come down by 15 percent in this product," he says. "Although salt is needed in foods for taste, texture and preserving, many foods contain hidden sources of salt."

"People cannot taste the salt in bread and cereals, for example, which is why food companies can play an important role by reducing salt levels in these types of foods."

In a number of categories, sodium levels only dropped by 10 percent or less over a 10-year period. Sodium levels rose by 6 percent in matched canned corned beef products and two percent in matched cheese products. And while margarines showed some good progress, with an average sodium reduction of 19 percent butter increased by 21 percent.

"The increase in sodium levels of canned corned beef and cheese, and small amount of movement in other categories is very surprising, given the global momentum around salt reduction. Food companies need to make more effort in these areas," says Mr Munro.

More information: "Changes in the Sodium Content of New Zealand Processed Foods: 2003–2013." *Nutrients* 2015, 7, 4054-4067. DOI: 10.3390/nu7064054

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