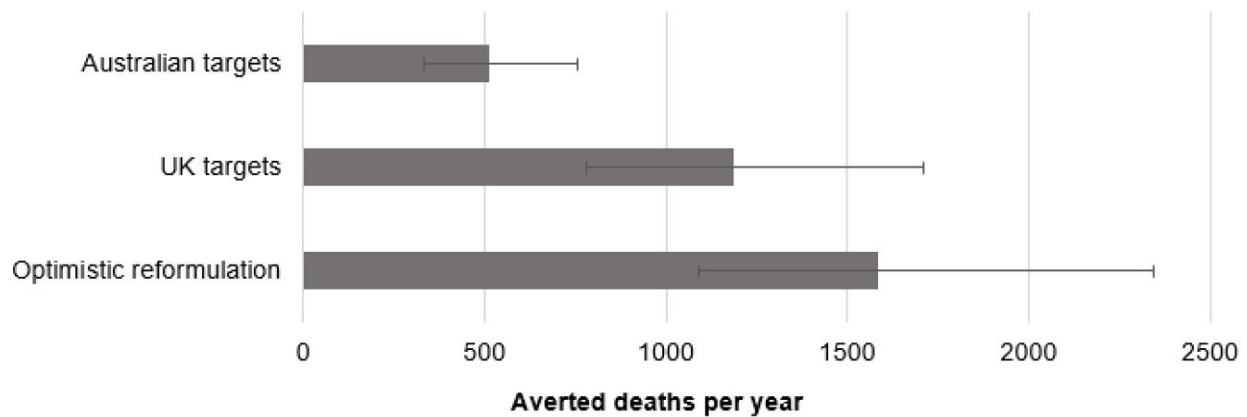


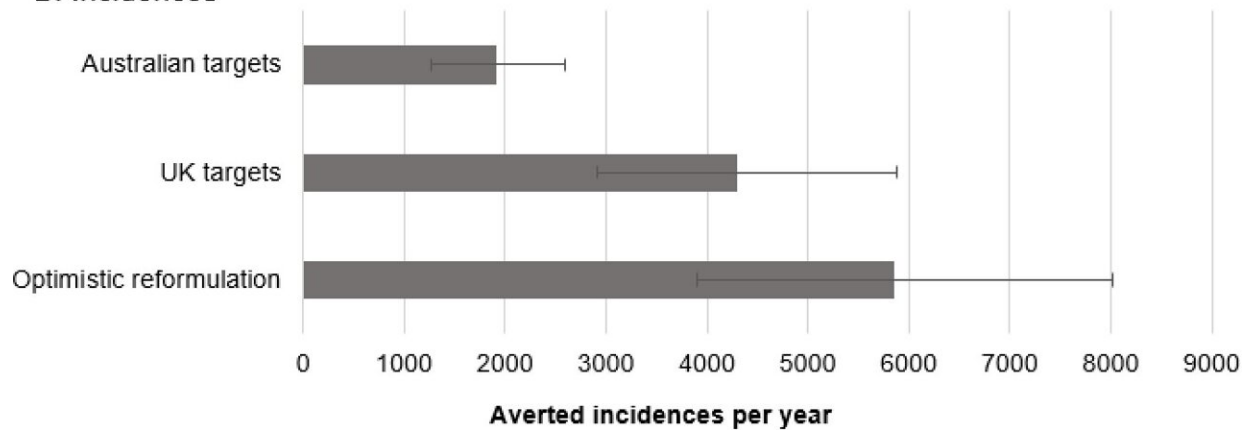
Handful of companies could prevent around 300 deaths a year by cutting salt in these products

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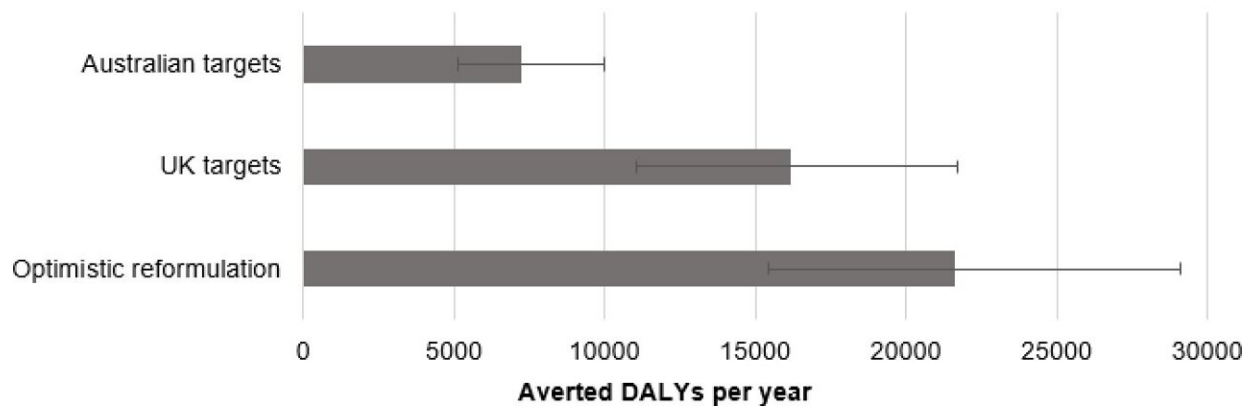
A. Deaths



B. Incidences



C. DALYs



Total number averted deaths (A), incidences (B), and DALYs (C) per year estimated by intervention. The error bars indicate the 95% UIs. The

reformulation targets for the optimistic reformulation program was defined in each of 76 food groups targeted by the UK reformulation program as the sales-weighted 25th percentile of sodium content in that specific food group. HFP, Australian government's Healthy Food Partnership sodium reformulation targets. DALY, disability-adjusted life year; UI, uncertainty interval. Credit: DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1003806

New research suggests around 300 deaths a year could be avoided if just five Aussie food manufacturers cut salt in packaged foods such as processed meat, bread, chicken nuggets and sausages down to government target levels. Of these five companies the top three were major supermarkets—by reformulating their home brand products in these categories to meet the government's new voluntary sodium targets, they could together make up around half of all deaths averted.

Lead author Dr. Kathy Trieu from The George Institute for Global Health said that a stronger and more comprehensive strategy could result in even bigger health gains. "We estimated that if all companies complied with the Australian government's new sodium targets, over 500 deaths could be prevented each year. But if Australia had the same targets already in place in the UK, that could increase by another 660 deaths prevented," she said.

"Instead of simply adopting the UK targets, the Government's Healthy Food Partnership initiative spent five years planning and developing their own, allowing the [food industry](#) to have an influence on the process, undermining its credibility and impact—it's such a wasted opportunity."

Almost all adults in Australia and worldwide eat too much salt, which is linked to high blood pressure and greater risk of stroke, [heart disease](#),

stomach cancer, kidney disease, and premature [death](#). To help reduce intakes, the Australian Government established sodium targets in 2020 for packaged foods to encourage food manufacturers to voluntarily reformulate their products. However, the potential impact of achieving these targets on health was unknown. George Institute researchers modeled the possible health gains that could be achieved if all food companies met the current Australian targets, and the UK targets which were shown to be achievable. They estimated averted deaths, incidence, and disability from cardiovascular disease (CVD), chronic kidney disease (CKD) and stomach cancer that could result from full compliance with these targets. The results suggested that if all companies met current government targets, Australians would be eating almost four percent less sodium, with around 500 deaths and 1,900 new cases of CVD, CKD, and [stomach cancer](#) being avoided each year.

"If we had the same targets as those set by the UK government, it would more than double the number of deaths averted, which would be comparable to the number of Australians that died on our roads in 2019," Dr. Trieu added.

The researchers identified several salty [food](#) categories such as butter, spreads, ready meals, table sauces, canned fish, and [breakfast cereals](#) that are covered by the UK program, but not Australia's. They also found for some categories, like rice cakes, cheddar cheeses, plain biscuits, and sweet bakery items, a large proportion of products already met the targets, indicating they were too lenient.

The George Institute's Program Head of Nutrition Science, Dr. Jason Wu, said that the weaknesses of the current system were that it applied to too few products, the targets were not ambitious enough and it was still voluntary, so companies could choose not to comply.

"With one in three Australians having [high blood pressure](#), stronger

government leadership to ensure packaged foods contain less salt could save thousands of lives each year as well as millions in healthcare costs. At a minimum, the government should make the targets compulsory and end industry self-regulation," he said.

"Our study suggests that prioritizing the reformulation of supermarket private label products would be a good place to start."

More information: Kathy Trieu et al, The estimated health impact of sodium reduction through food reformulation in Australia: A modeling study, *PLOS Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1003806](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003806)

Provided by George Institute for Global Health

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